ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

25 ¢

MAY 1942

THE MYSTERY OF MRS. DICKINSON — *Nick Carter*
MURDER! — *Arnold Bennett*
THE KEY IN MICHAEL — *Elsa Barker*
THE BLUE FINGERPRINT — *Stuart Palmer*
DILEMMA AT SHANGHAI — *Vincent Starrett*
CABBAGES AND KINGS — *Irvin S. Cobb*
TELL IT TO THE JUDGE — *Viola Brothers Shore*
THE BLOOMSBURY WONDER — *Thomas Burke*

AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE BEST DETECTIVE STORIES, NEW AND OLD

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

PUBLISHER

LAWRENCE E. SPIVAK

EDITOR

ELLERY QUEEN

VOL. 3 NO. 2 *MAY 1942*

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How many years is it since you read a Nick Carter story, behind the barn, or under the blanket by flashlight? And did you know that Nick Carter wrote short stories? At any rate, your Editors are proud to present this Nick Carter tale, not merely as a curiosity of American letters, but also to disprove the false notion that all Nick Carters were "trash." "The Mystery of Mrs. Dickinson" might have been written last year by an author of considerably less-slandered reputation!

THE MYSTERY OF MRS. DICKINSON

by NICK CARTER

CHAPTER I

THE SAD CASE OF MRS. DICKINSON

A FAT OLD MAN, a lean old man, and a young man who was neither fat nor lean, were Nick Carter's three visitors.

The fat man was Mr. Ferris, the lean man was Mr. Steele, and the young man was Richard Steele, nephew of the preceding.

Mr. Ferris opened the conversation.

"Few words are enough for busy men," he said.

"You know me. You know Mr. Steele. We're Ferris & Steele, the jewelers. Young Mr. Steele is our cashier.

"You also know Mr. George Dickinson, do you not?"

"Dealer in bric-a-brac and curios?" said Nick. "Doesn't need to deal in anything. Has money enough for a dozen men. In business for the love of it."

"Exactly. And Mrs. Dickinson — do you know her?"

"I do not. I heard of his marriage. She is very much his junior, I believe."

"He's nearly sixty; she can't be over twenty-five. And she's a beautiful woman, sir, if ever I saw one — sparkling black eyes, olive skin, the pure Spanish type.

"More than that, she is a lady by birth and breeding. I flatter myself that I know a lady when I see one, and Mrs. Dickinson could not be mistaken by anybody.

"Well, sir, our case has to do with her, and a sad case it is. Would you believe that this lovely creature is a kleptomaniac — that she's been robbing us for several months?"

"Would I believe it?" repeated Nick. "It depends on the evidence."

"Oh, the evidence is conclusive. Mr. Steele and myself have seen her do it."

"Why did you permit yourself to be robbed in this way?"

"Perhaps we were wrong; perhaps we were injudicious," said Mr. Ferris; "but our intentions were good. Let me tell you the story.

"It began in June, only a few months after the lady's marriage. She came into our store one day and introduced herself to us. It was I to whom she made herself known. Her husband has traded with us for many years. When we secure anything especially good in his line we always let him know of it, and our dealings with him in the last ten years will run up into six figures.

"Of course, I was very glad to see Mrs. Dickinson; indeed, I had some curiosity to see her. I showed her around our establishment. She asked the price of various articles, but bought nothing. The next day, however, she returned and purchased — let me see; what was the amount, Richard?"

Young Mr. Steele produced a memorandum book and consulted it.

"The first check," he said, "was for eighteen hundred and fifty dollars."

"Then she paid you by check?" said Nick.

"Yes," responded Ferris; "she gave us her husband's check."

"Was the check all right?"

"Of course it was. This is no case of common fraud, Mr. Carter; it is kleptomania — an insane passion for stealing. Her purchases have always been made in the most business-like way.

"On this first occasion, in fact, there appears to have been no theft. She visited the store twice and purchased goods, always with her husband's check, before we had cause to suspect that anything was wrong.

"Even then we were by no means sure. It is true that, after she had gone we missed a solitaire worth about two thousand dollars, but we could not be certain that she had taken it. Indeed, I never thought of such a thing. On the contrary, I suspected another person, and had some investigation made, but with a negative result.

"A few weeks later, while that investigation was still in progress, Mrs. Dickinson called a fourth time. She made a purchase amounting to six hundred dollars, and she stole another solitaire worth two thousand eight hundred dollars — a large and fine stone.

"On this occasion I was on the watch, and though I did not see her take the jewel, I was morally certain that she did it. It was there when she began to examine a tray of jewels; it was not there when she started to leave.

"In view of this fact, and our previous loss, I ventured to do something about it. I had our regular detective speak to her as she was going out.

"He did it in the most delicate manner possible. He spoke of the absence of the stone as if it had been lost while she was looking at the contents of the tray, and he suggested that it might have fallen and been caught in the trimmings of her dress.

"She returned with him immediately to the counter where I was standing, and we had the most disagreeable scene that ever I went through."

Here the elder Mr. Steele emitted a hard and dry laugh.

"Very well, very well," said Ferris; "I admit it to a certain extent. I lost my head. She took it so calmly. Her affectation of innocence was so perfect. In short, I let her go.

"I begged her pardon for the annoyance, and laid the blame on our detective. The fact was that I couldn't give the order for her arrest and search."

"If she hadn't been quite so handsome," croaked the withered Mr. Steele, "I guess my partner would have done better."

"Why, what could I do?" responded Ferris, tartly. "To arrest her would mean to raise the deuce of a row with Dickinson, and lose his trade. And if there had been a mistake, think of the position we'd have been in.

"There'd have been a horrible scandal, and you doubtless know, Mr. Carter, that such scandals are mighty bad for our business. Every jewelry house in this city has allowed itself to be robbed more than once rather than venture upon the arrest of a prominent woman, with the certain consequence of scaring away a lot of others.

"The long and short of it is that she got away. And she didn't take any offense at me. On the contrary, she seemed to think that I had behaved very well, and she gave a smile ——"

"Worth two thousand eight hundred dollars?" asked Nick.

"Not exactly; no, sir," said Ferris, getting red in the face. "But I was glad to get out of it that way. There was something in her manner which made me doubt the evidence of my own senses. When she had gone I hunted for that solitaire, like a fool, for more than an hour. Of course it was gone, and she had it.

"I had a long consultation with Mr. Steele — many of them, in fact. Of course, we knew that Dickinson was good for the amount, and that he would pay it, if we succeeded in proving our case to him beyond a doubt.

"I knew, also, that a woman who has that mania will not stop stealing. She can't. And it is a mania with her; I'm sure of it. I believe that she takes those things without really knowing what she's about, and that she forgets the theft the very next minute.

"That's the only way in which I can account for the complete innocence of her manner when questioned. She's forgotten about it. She imagines herself to be innocent.

"Well, I knew, as I've said, that she'd certainly go on stealing if that was her mania. So I formed a sort of plan with Mr. Steele which was that we should wait until she tried it again, and then have so many witnesses that there'd be no chance of error.

"We agreed not to arrest her on any account, nor to make any trouble for her, but simply to go to Mr. Dickinson and lay the case before him.

"That is what we propose to do now, for the thing has gone so far that we can't afford to wait.

"She was in the store yesterday afternoon. She got away with a necklace worth forty thousand dollars!

"By heavens! Mr. Carter, think of our standing there and allowing such a trick to be done right under our noses!"

"Why not?" said Nick. "By your own story it was only a sale."

"A sale?"

"Yes, you are perfectly certain that Mr. Dickinson will pay the amount. Now I'll venture a guess that you hope to figure up a considerable profit when he has done so. For instance, wouldn't you have sold that necklace for thirty thousand dollars, and the solitaires for fifteen per cent off the price you've named to me?"

Both Ferris and Steele protested in chorus. They had no idea of making a profit out of Mr. Dickinson's misfortune. The figures named were the bare worth of the goods at net cost.

"Suppose that they're recovered," said Nick, "what will you do? Will you take them back and say nothing?"

"Of course; of course," said Ferris. "They will be found in Mrs. Dickinson's rooms, I've no doubt. But I don't believe Dickinson will return them. I think he'll prefer to pay a fair price for them."

"Probably," said Nick. "But what do you want me to do about it?"

"Why, we wish you to act as our adviser — as the detective in the case."

"The duty of a detective is to learn things that other people don't know.

Now, you gentlemen know everything."

The tinge of sarcasm in Nick's tone escaped his listeners.

"Yes, to be sure," said Steele, "we know everything, but we still desire advice. What we want is that you should go with us to Dickinson's office to-day and talk with him."

"Wouldn't it be better, every way, if I quietly recovered the jewels for you? Then you could guard against Mrs. Dickinson's depredations in the future, and there would be no scandal."

But Ferris & Steele wouldn't have it that way. They wanted an immediate interview with Mr. Dickinson.

"Now, let me tell you just what you do want," said Nick at last. "You want the money. You're pressed for ready cash, and this is the easiest way to get it."

Ferris and Steele looked at each other as if they had been witnesses of a great feat of mind-reading.

"Moreover," continued Nick, "you want me to be present in order that you can lay the whole blame upon me, and save your business relations with Mr. Dickinson if anything goes wrong."

Both men protested that they had no such idea. They merely wished to have a man of good counsel present at the interview.

"Very well," said Nick; "though my opinion is unchanged I will go with you. As for advice that is out of the question. You are both as obstinate — if you'll pardon my saying so — as two Mississippi mules. Nothing that I can say will have any effect upon you. But the case interests me and I will go with you."

CHAPTER II

AN EMBARRASSING INTERVIEW

Mr. George Dickinson is a man of majestic presence. At sixty years of age he has the figure of a college athlete, big and strong.

His face, too, is youthful, and the only sign of his age is the whiteness of his abundant hair, which curls crisply around his broad forehead.

It was no wonder that Messrs. Ferris & Steele hesitated to open such a subject to such a man. The window was quite convenient, and it was thirty feet or more above the ground, for Mr. Dickinson has his wonderful curio store on the third floor of a Broadway building.

"What's the matter, gentlemen?" asked Dickinson, when they were all seated in his office. "Perhaps this is a friendly call. You don't seem anxious to proceed to business."

He laughed a frank, boyish laugh, as he looked at Ferris and Steele. A child could have read the desperate embarrassment on their faces.

Each waited for the other to begin, and both looked imploringly at Nick, but he clearly indicated his determination to be only a listener, and so, at last, Ferris began.

"It's a case in which we want your advice," said he. "There's a customer of ours for whom we feel the warmest friendship; but it happens most unfortunately that his wife — a young and beautiful woman, suffering as we believe under a terrible affliction — his wife, I repeat — has visited our store and has taken goods valued at nearly fifty thousand dollars. Now we desire to act in this affair in a friendly manner. Our deep sympathy with the gentleman in question ——"

Dickinson interrupted him by raising his hand.

There was a small part of the office separated from the remainder by a partition which did not reach to the ceiling. From behind this partition came the sound of a typewriter.

Dickinson stepped to the door of this inclosure, and said:

"Miss Adams, will you step out into the other office for a few minutes?"

Then he returned and walked straight up to the senior partner of the jewelers' firm.

"Ferris, you infernal fat old rascal!" he said, "have you the face to come here and tell me such a story as that about my wife?"

Ferris turned a pale sea-green, and if he thought at all during the minute's pause which ensued, it was probably upon his sins. He found no words in which to beg for his life.

Steele meanwhile was trembling with a faint, rustling sound, like the wind among dead leaves. His nephew rose hastily and walked to a water cooler in the corner, where he drank something like a quart of ice water.

What might have resulted is uncertain, but at that moment there was a light tap on the door.

Immediately it opened and a woman entered.

"Not now, Elsie," cried Dickinson hastily. "I am engaged at present. In a few minutes I shall be at liberty. Ned," he added to a young man who was also at the door, "will you get my wife a chair out there?"

Both Steele and Ferris leaped to their feet.

"Is that lady your wife?" gasped Ferris. "It's impossible!"

"Impossible?" cried Dickinson, in a voice like Gabriel's trumpet. "Do you think I don't know my own wife?"

"Why, what's the matter, George?" asked Mrs. Dickinson in an agitated voice, as she hastily stepped forward.

Her husband had his arm around her in a moment, and was facing her three accusers, who were speechless.

"It seems that I shall have to explain," said Nick. "Messrs. Ferris & Steele, jewelers, have been the victims of a notable swindle. A woman, representing herself to be Mrs. Dickinson, has called at their store several times, and presuming upon their knowledge of your financial and social standing, and upon their unwillingness to offend you, has stolen about thirty thousand dollars' worth ——"

"Forty-five thousand!" gasped Steele.

"Thirty thousand dollars' worth of jewels," Nick continued, without noticing the interruption, "before their very eyes.

"They came here to lay the case before you, Mr. Dickinson, and I came from simple curiosity regarding the affair. I am not surprised to find that they have totally misunderstood the nature of the case."

Dickinson reflected a minute, and meanwhile recovered control.

"What led your stupidity to suppose," he said, "that the woman was my wife?"

"She presented checks drawn to your order, and signed by you," said Ferris; "and the signature was genuine. It only remains for us to learn to what other woman you have been in the habit of giving checks, and ——"

Nick stepped hastily in front of Ferris, for otherwise there might have been manslaughter.

The jeweler's chagrin at the discovery of the way in which he had been duped had overcome his prudence, and he had grossly insulted Dickinson in the presence of his wife.

It required all the great detective's strength to stop Dickinson's rush, but he did it, and at last succeeded in bringing all present to their senses.

"Now that I know who you really are," said Dickinson to Nick, "I have confidence that we shall get a little light on this business. When you were introduced at first as Mr. Carter I did not think of the celebrated detective. As for you, Ferris and Steele, I accept your apology — for what it is worth."

"The root of this matter," said Nick, "is evidently in those checks. I think you must admit that they amounted to an identification. Although I do not think good judgment has been used by Ferris & Steele, I will say that the method employed at the start would have deceived any merchant.

"Now, since these checks went through the bank all right, and have caused no confusion in your accounts, I infer that they must have been drawn by you, and made to serve the purposes of this fraud by a clever trick.

"Young Mr. Steele has the dates and amounts of these checks. Let us compare them with the stubs in your check-book. The checks were drawn on the Chemical Bank, I believe."

Without a word of objection Mr. Dickinson produced the book.

"Is this your private or your business account?" asked Nick.

"I keep but one."

Comparison of Richard Steele's memoranda with the stubs in the book was the work of only a moment. They tallied exactly.

"Now we will send for the used checks," said Nick.

They were obtained from the bank. Ferris and the two Steeles identified them, and Dickinson admitted the signatures.

The last named had made no comment upon the matter since the moment when the first stub was found to tally with the memorandum.

Finally he said: "Of course you know what these checks are?"

"What do you mean?" asked Ferris.

"Why, these are the regular payments made by me to you for articles bought of you, and I hold your receipt in every case. How then, could the checks have been used as you allege?"

Mrs. Dickinson got in ahead of all the others who wished to speak at this point by begging her husband to explain.

"I don't understand business at all," she said, "and I'm so interested in this case."

"It's like this," responded her husband: "these men tell me that certain checks have been given them by a woman purporting to be you. The checks are found. I admit having drawn them.

"But, here's the point: the checks were drawn as payments by me to their firm. For instance, I bought a watch, studded with diamonds at their store on July 18. The next day I sent a check for it. The bill was six hundred dollars.

"They sent back the bill receipted. The check was indorsed by them and

put in their bank. And that settled that check. There was no way to get it out of the bank so that that woman could use it over again."

"Hold on," said Richard Steele, who for some time had been trying to get in a word; "I'll have to beg your pardon, Mr. Dickinson, and make a correction. You haven't paid your account by check since the middle of May."

"What?" cried Dickinson.

"I'm positive about that," said Richard, "for I noticed the change. Your account has been paid in cash every time."

"Can you prove that?" exclaimed Dickinson, very much astonished.

"Certainly."

"How were the payments made?"

"A boy brought the cash."

"I know that to be true in one instance," said Ferris. "I was present.

Dickinson rang a bell. A boy entered. He rang again, and another boy appeared.

"Was it either of these boys?" he asked.

Both Richard and Ferris replied promptly in the negative.

"I have had no other boys in my employ," said Dickinson as he dismissed them.

"The method of the fraud is now clear," said Nick. "The checks have been intercepted. How did you suppose they were sent?"

"By mail."

"Who attended to the mailing?"

"My typewriter, Miss Adams."

"Is she a dark woman, like a Spaniard, with flashing black eyes, and an olive skin?" cried Ferris, springing to his feet.

"Why, yes," stammered Dickinson; "she answers that description well enough. What of it?"

"What of it?" yelled Ferris. "Why, she's the woman, that's all. I see the game well enough!

"She formed the plan when you were married. She stole a check — only pretended to mail it, you see. Then she managed to raise the amount in cash, and paid our bill.

"With the check she bought jewelry, and sold it for enough to pay the next bill, and so on. It's plain as day. She must be arrested at once."

Dickinson, with a brow dark with anger, rang his bell.

One of the boys again entered the room.

"Send Miss Adams here," said Dickinson.

"She's gone out, sir," replied the boy.

"How long ago?"

"Not half a minute."

"After her!" cried Ferris, rushing toward the door with extraordinary speed, considering his bulk.

The two Steeles followed. Nick, with Mr. and Mrs. Dickinson, brought up the rear of the procession, which was headed by the office boy flying along in his eagerness to do a favor.

Ferris was close upon his heels.

Nick tried to stop this mad stampede, but the others were deaf to his cries.

They all ran down the stairs, too impatient to wait for an elevator.

"There she is!" cried the boy, when he reached the street.

He pointed to the retreating figure of the typewriter.

With a sort of growl, Ferris set his great bulk once more in motion. He even distanced the boy.

The others followed as they might.

Ferris caught up with the girl, and seized her roughly.

She turned upon him with a little scream.

Ferris struck his forehead with his fat and oily hand.

"Ten thousand devils!" he gasped, breathless with running. "This isn't the woman, either!"

CHAPTER III

NICK TAKES THE REINS

A crowd had gathered instantly, as crowds do in New York. The unusual spectacle of this absurd chase was sufficient to account for the throng.

Miss Adams' position was certainly very embarrassing. Both Dickinson and Nick were heartily sorry for her, and the former was so enraged against Ferris that he could hardly restrain himself.

"Look here, my fat friend," he said in Ferris' ear. "Don't you think that you've made us all sufficiently ridiculous? Suppose you take a back seat and allow Mr. Carter to handle the reins; that is, if he is still willing to have anything to do with you."

"I will take this case," said Nick calmly, "but only on the condition that

you name. I must conduct it."

Neither Ferris nor the two Steeles had a word to say.

"Miss Adams," said Nick, "I hope you will forget this annoyance, and go to lunch with a good appetite. I suppose that is where you were going."

"Yes, sir; but I'd like to know ——"

"When you come back, this matter shall be explained to you."

The detective lifted his hat, and the girl walked away.

"Now, Messrs. Ferris and Steele, if you will return to your store, I will meet you there at five o'clock this afternoon."

"But ——" Ferris began.

"On no other condition will I conduct this affair."

Ferris looked at his partner and the latter nodded assent.

"There is one thing, however," said Richard Steele, "which, it seems to me, should not be overlooked. While Miss Adams was certainly not the woman who came to our store, she may be in the plot. She may have handed the checks to a confederate."

"Thank you," said Nick, "I will consider that possibility. Good-day."

The three men took their departure.

Nick walked back to the curio store with the Dickinsons.

They plied him with questions, but he would give no definite answer.

"I am not prepared to speak about the case yet," he said. "I will take it up again this afternoon at the hour named, and if you are sufficiently interested to be at Ferris & Steele's at that time, you shall learn all that I then know."

It is needless to say that, at the hour named, the Dickinsons were present. In fact, they were ahead of time. Nick arrived on the second, as usual.

"Shall we come into the private office?" said Steele. "We can talk there without interruption."

They were then standing near the door, before the principal diamond counter.

"What I have to say can be said here," replied Nick. "In fact, it is not very much.

"The theory of the case has already been correctly stated. The checks were intercepted, and were given to the woman who played the part of Mrs. Dickinson.

"The boy who came with the cash was, of course, in the pay of the schemers. After obtaining the receipted bills, he mailed them to Mr. Dickinson in

one of Ferris & Steele's envelopes and that is all there is to the game. The remaining details I must keep in reserve for a few minutes. As to the woman, you have given me an accurate description of her.

"From what you tell me, I judge that she must very closely resemble that person now entering the store."

He pointed to a beautiful and richly-dressed woman, who was just coming in from the street.

She had flashing black eyes, an olive-tinted oval face, of the Spanish type.

"By the eternal heavens!" exclaimed Ferris, but in a guarded tone, for Nick's hand had been laid upon him. "It is the woman herself!"

"So I supposed," said the detective. "Let us see what she will do."

She came smilingly up to the counter, and greeted Ferris pleasantly.

She simply glanced at Mr. and Mrs. Dickinson. It was evident that she did not know them.

"Well, sir," she said to Ferris, "have you anything pretty to show me to-day?"

"I will show you the inside of a prison, you thief!" exclaimed Ferris.

The woman paled till her face was ghastly. By a supreme effort she recovered something like command of herself and demanded "the reason for this insult."

It was given her in a very few words, and she had the unhappiness of making the acquaintance of "her husband," Mr. George Dickinson.

She was got into the private office as quickly and as quietly as possible, and there an explanation was demanded of her.

She refused to speak.

"I will refer you to my lawyer," she said. "He will clear me of this infamous charge."

It was all a bluff, of course. The woman knew that she had no defense.

But she tried one shrewd trick. She denied that she had ever pretended to be Mrs. Dickinson, and declared that it was all a case of mistaken identity.

"Call in our spotter and Richard," said Steele. "They both know her."

The spotter came, but not Richard. It appeared that the young man had left the store.

"That is by my arrangement," said Nick. "I know where he has gone, and why. If you will come with me, Mr. Ferris, and Mr. Steele, we will join Richard, and clear up the remainder of the case."

The woman was put in charge of an officer, and Ferris and Steele ac-

companied Nick.

They took a carriage and were driven rapidly uptown.

Just above Madison Square they turned out of Broadway into one of the side streets leading eastward.

They stopped before a handsome apartment house, and all alighted.

A young man who was standing on the steps approached Nick, at a signal from the detective.

"Has Mr. Steele arrived?" asked Nick.

"Yes," replied the other. "He is inside."

"This is one of my assistants," said the detective. "He is familiarly known as Patsy. He came up here with Richard to assist in the investigation."

"I think you might have told me about this," muttered Steele.

They entered the house and ascended to the third floor.

Nick opened the door of a suite, and they entered.

They passed into a parlor, and then into a dressing room.

At the farther end, before a mirror, stood a man with white hair.

He was in the act of adjusting a great false beard, also perfectly white.

At the sound of their steps he turned, revealing the face of Richard Steele.

An exclamation of rage escaped him, and in an instant there was a revolver in his hand.

But Nick had him by the wrist, and the weapon was wrested from his grasp. Then Nick handcuffed him; after which proceeding the detective opened a hand-bag on the dressing table, and produced most of the missing jewels, including the piece said to be worth forty thousand dollars.

"Richard!" gasped his uncle, "how do you account for this?"

"Easily enough," said the young man, with a sneer on his white lips. "It results from my poverty and your wealth. I was of your own blood. You kept me poor. You gave me hard work and small pay. Well, this is the result of your investment. I am a thief; your name is disgraced. I have no more to say."

"These are the woman's rooms," said Nick. "You see that such a woman requires money, and there are, unfortunately, men who are weak enough to steal it, as the price of what is called love."

"But how did you track her?" exclaimed Ferris in amazement. "I'm all at sea, Mr. Carter."

"Why, it was easy enough. The crime was evidently an 'inside job.' The

recklessness with which this last theft was made proved to me that the woman knew of your determination not to make an arrest.

"It was clearly the last desperate play in the game. So much being learned, it was only necessary to get at that little business of the checks.

"The result pointed directly to your cashier — to Richard. Nobody in Mr. Dickinson's employ, and nobody else in your employ, had the requisite information.

"Richard had it easily in his power to extract the checks from the letters. He was at liberty to open the firm's mail.

"It remained then, to track the woman. I did it by means of the boy, who, you remember, appeared in the case as the messenger with the cash.

"I visited your store early this afternoon in disguise, and secured a description of the boy. It happened to answer very closely to a youth who was recently discharged from the employ of the district messenger company on suspicion of dishonesty.

"I learned that it was the same boy. He was employed in the nearest office to your store, and used to answer your call sometimes.

"That was how Richard came to know him.

"Well, I found the boy, and broke his nerve. He confessed to having acted as messenger between Richard and this woman, whose name is Fanny Legrand.

"I made him take a message to her in Richard's name, asking her to appear at the store at five o'clock, in the character of Mrs. Dickinson.

"She did so. Of course, when Richard saw what took place he had no other recourse than flight. I knew that he would come here in order to get the diamonds.

"My young man, Patsy, followed him, and here he is.

"And now, Mr. Steele, what shall we do with him?"

"Prosecute!" said the withered old man, compressing his lips. "I have no sympathy with thieves."

"Nor I, either," said Nick; "and that reminds me, Mr. Ferris, to ask you again, what is the price of this diamond necklace?"

Ferris screwed up one side of his face, and then the other.

"Considering the circumstances," he said, "we'll let you have it for twenty-nine thousand dollars."

"A fair price," responded the detective; "but I don't want the necklace at that money. I prefer my regular fee in cash."

Every great literary figure, especially among the English, has at least one fine murder story in his system. Here is Arnold Bennett's — and, as you might have expected of Bennett, he did something curiously interesting about his detective.

MURDER!

by ARNOLD BENNETT

Two men, named respectively Lomax Harder and John Franting, were walking side by side one autumn afternoon, on the Marine Parade of the seaside resort and port of Quangate (English Channel). Both were well-dressed and had the air of moderate wealth, and both were about thirty-five years of age. At this point the resemblances between them ceased. Lomax Harder had refined features, an enormous forehead, fair hair, and a delicate, almost apologetic manner. John Franting was low-browed, heavy chinned, scowling, defiant, indeed what is called a tough customer. Lomax Harder corresponded in appearance with the popular notion of a poet — save that he was carefully barbered. He was in fact a poet, and not unknown in the tiny, trifling, mad world where poetry is a matter of first-rate interest. John Franting corresponded in appearance with the popular notion of a gambler, an amateur boxer, and, in spare time, a deluder of women. Popular notions sometimes fit the truth.

Lomax Harder, somewhat nervously buttoning his overcoat, said in a quiet but firm and insistent tone:

"Haven't you got anything to say?"

John Franting stopped suddenly in front of a shop whose façade bore the sign: "Gontle. Gunsmith."

"Not in words," answered Franting. "I'm going in here."

And he brusquely entered the small, shabby shop.

Lomax Harder hesitated half a second, and then followed his companion.

The shopman was a middle-aged gentleman wearing a black velvet coat.

"Good afternoon," he greeted Franting, with an expression and in a tone of urbane condescension which seemed to indicate that Franting was a wise as well as a fortunate man in that he knew of the excellence of Gontle's and had the wit to come into Gontle's.

For the name of Gontle was favourably and respectfully known wherever

triggers are pressed. Not only along the whole length of the Channel coast, but throughout England, was Gontle's renowned. Sportsmen would travel to Quangate from the far north, and even from London, to buy guns. To say: 'I bought it at Gontle's,' or 'Old Gontle recommended it,' was sufficient to silence any dispute concerning the merits of a fire-arm. Experts bowed the head before the unique reputation of Gontle. As for old Gontle, he was extremely and pardonably conceited. His conviction that no other gunsmith in the wide world could compare with him was absolute. He sold guns and rifles with the gesture of a monarch conferring an honour. He never argued; he stated; and the customer who contradicted him was as likely as not to be courteously and icily informed by Gontle of the geographical situation of the shop-door. Such shops exist in the English provinces, and nobody knows how they have achieved their renown. They could exist nowhere else.

"'d afternoon," said Franting gruffly, and paused.

"What can I do for you?" asked Mr. Gontle, as if saying: 'Now don't be afraid. This shop is tremendous, and I am tremendous; but I shall not eat you.'

"I want a revolver," Franting snapped.

"Ah! A revolver!" commented Mr. Gontle, as if saying: 'A gun or a rifle, yes! But a revolver — an arm without individuality, manufactured wholesale! . . . However, I suppose I must deign to accommodate you.'

"I presume you know something about revolvers?" asked Mr. Gontle, as he began to produce the weapons.

"A little."

"Do you know the Webley Mark III?"

"Can't say that I do."

"Ah! It is the best for all common purposes." And Mr. Gontle's glance said: 'Have the goodness not to tell me it isn't.'

Franting examined the Webley Mark III.

"You see," said Mr. Gontle. "The point about it is that until the breach is properly closed it cannot be fired. So that it can't blow open and maim or kill the would-be murderer." Mr. Gontle smiled archly at one of his oldest jokes.

"What about suicides?" Franting grimly demanded.

"Ah!"

"You might show me just how to load it," said Franting.

Mr. Gontle, having found ammunition, complied with this reasonable

request.

"The barrel's a bit scratched," said Franting.

Mr. Gontle inspected the scratch with pain. He would have denied the scratch, but could not.

"Here's another one," said he, "since you're so particular." He simply had to put customers in their place.

"You might load it," said Franting.

Mr. Gontle loaded the second revolver.

"I'd like to try it," said Franting.

"Certainly," said Mr. Gontle, and led Franting out of the shop by the back, and down to a cellar where revolvers could be experimented with.

Lomax Harder was now alone in the shop. He hesitated a long time and then picked up the revolver rejected by Franting, fingered it, put it down, and picked it up again. The back-door of the shop opened suddenly, and, startled, Harder dropped the revolver into his overcoat pocket: a thoughtless, quite unpremeditated act. He dared not remove the revolver. The revolver was as fast in his pocket as though the pocket had been sewn up.

"And cartridges?" asked Mr. Gontle of Franting.

"Oh," said Franting, "I've only had one shot. Five'll be more than enough for the present. What does it weigh?"

"Let me see. Four inch barrel? Yes. One pound four ounces."

Franting paid for the revolver, receiving thirteen shillings in change from a five-pound note, and strode out of the shop, weapon in hand. He was gone before Lomax Harder decided upon a course of action.

"And for you, sir?" said Mr. Gontle, addressing the poet.

Harder suddenly comprehended that Mr. Gontle had mistaken him for a separate customer, who had happened to enter the shop a moment after the first one. Harder and Franting had said not a word to one another during the purchase, and Harder well knew that in the most exclusive shops it is the custom utterly to ignore a second customer until the first one has been dealt with.

"I want to see some foils." Harder spoke stammeringly the only words that came into his head.

"Foils!" exclaimed Mr. Gontle, shocked, as if to say: "Is it conceivable that you should imagine that I, Gontle, gunsmith, sell such things as foils?"

After a little talk Harder apologized and departed — a thief.

"I'll call later and pay the fellow," said Harder to his restive conscience.

"No. I can't do that. I'll send him some anonymous postal orders."

He crossed the Parade and saw Franting, a small left-handed figure all alone far below on the deserted sands, pointing the revolver. He thought that his ear caught the sound of a discharge, but the distance was too great for him to be sure. He continued to watch, and at length Franting walked westward diagonally across the beach.

"He's going back to the Bellevue," thought Harder, the Bellevue being the hotel from which he had met Franting coming out half an hour earlier. He strolled slowly towards the white hotel. But Franting, who had evidently come up the face of the cliff in the penny lift, was before him. Harder, standing outside, saw Franting seated in the lounge. Then Franting rose and vanished down a long passage at the rear of the lounge. Harder entered the hotel rather guiltily. There was no hall-porter at the door, and not a soul in the lounge or in sight of the lounge. Harder went down the long passage.

At the end of the passage Lomax Harder found himself in a billiard-room — an apartment built partly of brick and partly of wood on a sort of courtyard behind the main structure of the hotel. The roof, of iron and grimy glass, rose to a point in the middle. On two sides the high walls of the hotel obscured the light. Dusk was already closing in. A small fire burned feebly in the grate. A large radiator under the window was steel-cold, for though summer was finished, winter had not officially begun in the small economically-run hotel: so that the room was chilly; nevertheless, in deference to the English passion for fresh air and discomfort, the window was wide open.

Franting, in his overcoat, and an unlit cigarette between his lips, stood lowering with his back to the bit of fire. At sight of Harder he lifted his chin in a dangerous challenge.

"So you're still following me about," he said resentfully to Harder.

"Yes," said the latter, with his curious gentle primness of manner. "I came down here especially to talk to you. I should have said all I had to say earlier, only you happened to be going out of the hotel just as I was coming in. You didn't seem to want to talk in the street; but there's some talking has to be done. I've a few things I must tell you." Harder appeared to be perfectly calm, and he felt perfectly calm. He advanced from the door towards the billiard-table.

Franting raised his hand, displaying his square-ended, brutal fingers in

the twilight.

"Now listen to me," he said with cold, measured ferocity. "You can't tell me anything I don't know. If there's some talking to be done I'll do it myself, and when I've finished you can get out. I know that my wife has taken a ticket for Copenhagen by the steamer from Harwich, and that she's been seeing to her passport, and packing. And of course I know that you have interests in Copenhagen and spend about half your precious time there. I'm not worrying to connect the two things. All that's got nothing to do with me. Emily has always seen a great deal of you, and I know that the last week or two she's been seeing you more than ever. Not that I mind that. I know that she objects to my treatment of her and my conduct generally. That's all right, but it's a matter that only concerns her and me. I mean that it's no concern of yours, for instance, or anybody else's. If she objects enough she can try and divorce me. I doubt if she'd succeed, but you can never be sure — with these new laws. Anyhow she's my wife till she does divorce me, and so she has the usual duties and responsibilities towards me — even though I was the worst husband in the world. That's how I look at it, in my old-fashioned way. I've just had a letter from her — she knew I was here, and I expect that explains how you knew I was here."

"It does," said Lomax Harder quietly.

Franting pulled a letter out of his inner pocket and unfolded it.

"Yes," he said, glancing at it, and read some sentences aloud: " 'I have absolutely decided to leave you, and I won't hide from you that I know you know who is doing what he can to help me. I can't live with you any longer. You may be very fond of me, as you say, but I find your way of showing your fondness too humiliating and painful. I've said this to you before, and now I'm saying it for the last time.' And so on and so on."

Franting tore the letter in two, dropped one half on the floor, twisted the other half into a spill, turned to the fire, and lit his cigarette.

"That's what I think of her letter," he proceeded, the cigarette between his teeth. "You're helping her, are you? Very well. I don't say you're in love with her, or she with you. I'll make no wild statements. But if you aren't in love with her I wonder why you're taking all this trouble over her. Do you go about the world helping ladies who say they're unhappy just for the pure sake of helping? Never mind. Emily isn't going to leave me. Get that into your head. I shan't let her leave me. She has money, and I haven't. I've been living on her, and it would be infernally awkward for me

if she left me for good. That's a reason for keeping her, isn't it? But you may believe me or not — it isn't my reason. She's right enough when she says I'm very fond of her. That's a reason for keeping her too. But it isn't my reason. My reason is that a wife's a wife, and she can't break her word just because everything isn't lovely in the garden. I've heard it said I'm unmoral. I'm not all unmoral. And I feel particularly strongly about what's called the marriage tie." He drew the revolver from his overcoat pocket, and held it up to view. "You see this thing. You saw me buy it. Now you needn't be afraid. I'm not threatening you; and it's no part of my game to shoot you. I've nothing to do with your goings-on. What I have to do with is the goings-on of my wife. If she deserts me—for you or for anybody or for nobody — I shall follow her, whether it's to Copenhagen or Bangkok or the North Pole, and I shall kill her — with just this very revolver that you saw me buy. And now you can get out."

Franting replaced the revolver, and began to consume the cigarette with fierce and larger puffs.

Lomax Harder looked at the grim, set, brutal, scowling bitter face, and knew that Franting meant what he had said. Nothing would stop him from carrying out his threat. The fellow was not an argufier; he could not reason; but he had unmistakable grit and would never recoil from the fear of consequences. If Emily left him, Emily was a dead woman; nothing in the end could protect her from the execution of her husband's menace. On the other hand, nothing would persuade her to remain with her husband. She had decided to go, and she would go. And indeed the mere thought of this lady to whom he, Harder, was utterly devoted, staying with her husband and continuing to suffer the tortures and humiliations which she had been suffering for years — this thought revolted him. He could not think it.

He stepped forward along the side of the billiard-table, and simultaneously Franting stepped forward to meet him. Lomax Harder snatched the revolver which was in his pocket, aimed, and pulled the trigger.

Franting collapsed, with the upper half of his body somehow balanced on the edge of the billiard-table. He was dead. The sound of the report echoed in Harder's ear like the sound of a violin string loudly twanged by a finger. He saw a little reddish hole in Franting's bronzed right temple.

"Well," he thought, "somebody had to die. And it's better him than Emily." He felt that he had performed a righteous act. Also he felt a little sorry for Franting.

Then he was afraid. He was afraid for himself, because he wanted not to die, especially on the scaffold; but also for Emily Franting who would be friendless and helpless without him; he could not bear to think of her alone in the world — the central point of a terrific scandal. He must get away instantly. . . .

Not down the corridor back into the hotel-lounge! No! That would be fatal! The window. He glanced at the corpse. It was more odd, curious, than affrighting. He had made the corpse. Strange! He could not unmake it. He had accomplished the irrevocable. Impressive! He saw Franting's cigarette glowing on the linoleum in the deepening dusk, and picked it up and threw it into the fender.

Lace curtains hung across the whole width of the window. He drew one aside, and looked forth. The light was much stronger in the courtyard than within the room. He put his gloves on. He gave a last look at the corpse, straddled the window-sill, and was on the brick pavement of the courtyard. He saw that the curtain had fallen back into the perpendicular.

He gazed around. Nobody! Not a light in any window! He saw a green wooden gate, pushed it; it yielded; then a sort of entry-passage. . . . In a moment, after two half-turns, he was on the Marine Parade again. He was a fugitive. Should he fly to the right, to the left? Then he had an inspiration. An idea of genius for baffling pursuers. He would go into the hotel by the main-entrance. He went slowly and deliberately into the portico, where a middle-aged hall-porter was standing in the gloom.

"Good evening, sir."

"Good evening. Have you got any rooms?"

"I think so, sir. The housekeeper is out, but she'll be back in a moment — if you'd like a seat. The manager's away in London."

The hall-porter suddenly illuminated the lounge, and Lomax Harder, blinking, entered and sat down.

"I might have a cocktail while I'm waiting," the murderer suggested with a bright and friendly smile. "A Bronx."

"Certainly, sir. The page is off duty. He sees to orders in the lounge, but I'll attend to you myself."

"What a hotel!" thought the murderer, solitary in the chilly lounge, and gave a glance down the long passage. "Is the whole place run by the hall-porter? But of course it's the dead season."

Was it conceivable that nobody had heard the sound of the shot?

Harder had a strong impulse to run away. But no! To do so would be highly dangerous. He restrained himself.

"How much?" he asked of the hall-porter, who had arrived with surprising quickness, tray in hand and glass on tray.

"A shilling, sir."

The murderer gave him eighteenpence, and drank off the cocktail.

"Thank you very much, sir." The hall-porter took the glass.

"See here!" said the murderer. "I'll look in again. I've got one or two little errands to do."

And he went, slowly, into the obscurity of the Marine Parade.

Lomax Harder leant over the left arm of the sea-wall of the man-made port of Quangate. Not another soul was there. Night had fallen. The lighthouse at the extremity of the right arm was occulting. The lights — some red, some green, many white — of ships at sea passed in both directions in endless processions. Waves plashed gently against the vast masonry of the wall. The wind, blowing steadily from the north-west, was not cold. Harder, looking about — though he knew he was absolutely alone, took his revolver from his overcoat pocket and stealthily dropped it into the sea. Then he turned round and gazed across the small harbour at the mysterious amphitheatre of the lighted town, and heard public clocks and religious clocks striking the hour.

He was a murderer, but why should he not successfully escape detection? Other murderers had done so. He had all his wits. He was not excited. He was not morbid. His perspective of things was not askew. The hall-porter had not seen his first entrance into the hotel, nor his exit after the crime. Nobody had seen them. He had left nothing behind in the billiard-room. No finger marks on the window-sill. (The putting-on of his gloves was in itself a clear demonstration that he had fully kept his presence of mind.) No footmarks on the hard, dry pavement of the courtyard.

Of course there was the possibility that some person unseen had seen him getting out of the window. Slight: but still a possibility! And there was also the possibility that someone who knew Franting by sight had noted him walking by Franting's side in the streets. If such a person informed the police and gave a description of him, inquiries might be made. . . . No! Nothing in it. His appearance offered nothing remarkable to the eye of a casual observer — except his forehead, of which he was rather proud, but

which was hidden by his hat.

It was generally believed that criminals always did something silly. But so far he had done nothing silly, and he was convinced that, in regard to the crime, he never would do anything silly. He had none of the desire, supposed to be common among murderers, to revisit the scene of the crime or to look upon the corpse once more. Although he regretted the necessity for his act, he felt no slightest twinge of conscience. Somebody had to die, and surely it was better that a brute should die than the heavenly, enchanting, martyrized creature whom his act had rescued forever from the brute! He was aware within himself of an ecstasy of devotion to Emily Franting — now a widow and free. She was a unique woman. Strange that a woman of such gifts should have come under the sway of so obvious a scoundrel as Franting. But she was very young at the time, and such freaks of sex had happened before and would happen again; they were a widespread phenomenon in the history of the relations of men and women. He would have killed a hundred men if a hundred men had threatened her felicity. His heart was pure; he wanted nothing from Emily in exchange for what he had done in her defence. He was passionate in her defence. When he reflected upon the coarseness and cruelty of the gesture by which Franting had used Emily's letter to light his cigarette, Harder's cheeks grew hot with burning resentment.

A clock struck the quarter. Harder walked quickly to the harbour front, where was a taxi-rank, and drove to the station. . . . A sudden apprehension! The crime might have been discovered! Police might already be watching for suspicious-looking travellers! Absurd! Still, the apprehension remained despite its absurdity. The taxi-driver looked at him queerly. No! Imagination! He hesitated on the threshold of the station, then walked boldly in, and showed his return ticket to the ticket-inspector. No sign of a policeman. He got into the Pullman car, where five other passengers were sitting. The train started.

He nearly missed the boat-train at Liverpool Street because according to its custom the Quangate flyer arrived twenty minutes late at Victoria. And at Victoria the foolish part of him, as distinguished from the common-sense part, suffered another spasm of fear. Would detectives, instructed by telegraph, be waiting for the train? No! An absurd idea! The boat-train from Liverpool Street was crowded with travellers, and the platform crowded with senders-off. He gathered from scraps of talk overheard that an inter-

national conference was about to take place at Copenhagen. And he had known nothing of it — not seen a word of it in the papers! Excusable perhaps; graver matters had held his attention.

Useless to look for Emily in the vast bustle of the compartments! She had her through ticket (which she had taken herself, in order to avoid possible complications), and she happened to be the only woman in the world who was never late and never in a hurry. She was certain to be in the train. But was she in the train? Something sinister might have come to pass. For instance, a telephone message to the flat that her husband had been found dead with a bullet in his brain.

The swift two-hour journey to Harwich was terrible for Lomax Harder. He remembered that he had left the unburnt part of the letter lying under the billiard-table. Forgetful! Silly! One of the silly things that criminals did! And on Parkeston Quay the confusion was enormous. He did not walk, he was swept, on to the great shaking steamer whose dark funnels rose amid wisps of steam into the starry sky. One advantage: detectives would have no chance in that multitudinous scene, unless indeed they held up the ship.

The ship roared a warning, and slid away from the quay, groped down the tortuous channel to the harbour mouth, and was in the North Sea; and England dwindled to naught but a string of lights. He searched every deck from stem to stern, and could not find Emily. She had not caught the train, or, if she had caught the train, she had not boarded the steamer because he had failed to appear. His misery was intense. Everything was going wrong. And on the arrival at Esbjerg would not detectives be lying in wait for the Copenhagen train? . . .

Then he descried her, and she him. She too had been searching. Only chance had kept them apart. Her joy at finding him was ecstatic; tears came into his eyes at sight of it. He was everything to her, absolutely everything. He clasped her right hand in both his hands and gazed at her in the dim, diffused light blended of stars, moon and electricity. No woman was ever like her: mature, innocent, wise, trustful, honest. And the touching beauty of her appealing, sad, happy face, and the pride of her carriage! A unique jewel — snatched from the brutal grasp of that fellow — who had ripped her solemn letter in two and used it as a spill for his cigarette! She related her movements; and he his. Then she said:

"Well?"

"I didn't go," he answered. "Thought it best not to. I'm convinced it

wouldn't have been any use."

He had not intended to tell her this lie. Yet when it came to the point, what else could he say? He told one lie instead of twenty. He was deceiving her, but for her sake. Even if the worst occurred, she was forever safe from that brutal grasp. And he had saved her. As for the conceivable complications of the future, he refused to front them; he could live in the marvellous present. He felt suddenly the amazing beauty of the night at sea, and beneath all his other sensations was the obscure sensation of a weight at his heart.

"I expect you were right," she angelically acquiesced.

The Superintendent of Police (Quangate was the county town of the western half of the county), and a detective-sergeant were in the billiard-room of the Bellevue. Both wore mufti. The powerful green-shaded lamps usual in billiard-rooms shone down ruthlessly on the green table, and on the reclining body of John Franting, which had not moved and had not been moved.

A charwoman was just leaving these officers when a stout gentleman, who had successfully beguiled a policeman guarding the other end of the long corridor, squeezed past her, greeted the two officers, and shut the door.

The Superintendent, a thin man, with lips to match, and a moustache, stared hard at the arrival.

"I am staying with my friend Dr. Furnival," said the arrival cheerfully. "You telephoned for him, and as he had to go out to one of those cases in which nature will not wait, I offered to come in his place. I've met you before, Superintendent, at Scotland Yard."

"Dr. Austin Bond!" exclaimed the Superintendent.

"He," said the other.

They shook hands, Dr. Bond genially, the Superintendent half-consequential, half-deferential, as one who had his dignity to think about; also as one who resented an intrusion, but dared not show resentment.

The detective-sergeant recoiled at the dazzling name of the great amateur detective, a genius who had solved the famous mysteries of "The Yellow Hat," "The Three Towns," "The Three Feathers," "The Gold Spoon," etc., etc., etc., whose devilish perspicacity had again and again made professional detectives both look and feel foolish, and whose notorious friendship with the loftiest heads of Scotland Yard compelled all police forces to treat

him very politely indeed.

"Yes," said Dr. Austin Bond, after detailed examination. "Been shot about ninety minutes, poor fellow! Who found him?"

"That woman who's just gone out. Some servant here. Came in to look after the fire."

"How long since?"

"Oh! About an hour ago."

"Found the bullet? I see it hit the brass on that cue-rack there."

The detective-sergeant glanced at the Superintendent, who, however, resolutely remained unastonished.

"Here's the bullet," said the Superintendent.

"Ah!" commented Dr. Austin Bond, glinting through his spectacles at the bullet as it lay in the Superintendent's hand. "Decimal 38, I see. Flattened. It would be."

"Sergeant," said the Superintendent. "You can get help and have the body moved, now Dr. Bond has made his examination. Eh, doctor?"

"Certainly," answered Dr. Bond, at the fireplace. "He was smoking a cigarette, I see."

"Either he or his murderer."

"You've got a clue?"

"Oh, yes," the Superintendent answered, not without pride. "Look here. Your torch, sergeant."

The detective-sergeant produced a pocket electric-lamp, and the Superintendent turned to the window-sill.

"I've got a stronger one than that," said Dr. Austin Bond, producing another torch.

The Superintendent displayed finger-prints on the window-frame, footmarks on the sill, and a few strands of inferior blue cloth. Dr. Austin Bond next produced a magnifying glass, and inspected the evidence at very short range.

"The murderer must have been a tall man — you can judge that from the angle of fire; he wore a blue suit, which he tore slightly on this splintered wood of the window-frame; one of his boots had a hole in the middle of the sole, and he'd only three fingers on his left hand. He must have come in by the window and gone out by the window, because the hall-porter is sure that nobody except the dead man entered the lounge by any door within an hour of the time when the murder must have been committed." The Superin-

tendent proudly gave many more details, and ended by saying that he had already given instructions to circulate a description.

"Curious," said Dr. Austin Bond, "that a man like John Franting should let anyone enter the room by the window! Especially a shabby-looking man!"

"You knew the deceased personally then?"

"No! But I know he was John Franting."

"How, Doctor?"

"Luck."

"Sergeant," said the Superintendent, piqued. "Tell the constable to fetch the hall-porter."

Dr. Austin Bond walked to and fro, peering everywhere, and picked up a piece of paper that had lodged against the step of the platform which ran round two sides of the room for the raising of the spectators' benches. He glanced at the paper casually, and dropped it again.

"My man," the Superintendent addressed the hall-porter. "How can you be sure that nobody came in here this afternoon?"

"Because I was in my cubicle all the time, sir."

The hall-porter was lying. But he had to think of his own welfare. On the previous day he had been reprimanded for quitting his post against the rule. Taking advantage of the absence of the manager, he had sinned once again, and he lived in fear of dismissal if found out.

"With a full view of the lounge?"

"Yes, sir."

"Might have been in there beforehand," Dr. Austin Bond suggested.

"No," said the Superintendent. "The charwoman came in twice. Once just before Franting came in. She saw the fire wanted making up and she went for some coal, and then returned later with some coal. But the look of Franting frightened her, and she went back with her coal."

"Yes," said the hall-porter. "I saw that."

Another lie.

At a sign from the Superintendent he withdrew.

"I should like to have a word with that charwoman," said Dr. Austin Bond.

The Superintendent hesitated. Why should the great amateur meddle with what did not concern him? Nobody had asked his help. But the Superintendent thought of the amateur's relations with Scotland Yard, and

sent for the charwoman.

"Did you clean the window here to-day?" Dr. Austin Bond interrogated her.

"Yes, please, sir."

"Show me your left hand." The slattern obeyed. "How did you lose your little finger?"

"In a mangle accident, sir."

"Just come to the window, will you, and put your hands on it. But take off your left boot first."

The slattern began to weep.

"It's quite all right, my good creature." Dr. Austin Bond reassured her. "Your skirt is torn at the hem, isn't it?"

When the slattern was released from her ordeal and had gone, carrying one boot in her grimy hand, Dr. Austin Bond said genially to the Superintendent:

"Just a fluke. I happened to notice she'd only three fingers on her left hand when she passed me in the corridor. Sorry I've destroyed your evidence. But I felt sure almost from the first that the murderer hadn't either entered or decamped by the window."

"How?"

"Because I think he's still here in the room."

The two police officers gazed about them as if exploring the room for the murderer.

"I think he's there."

Dr. Austin Bond pointed to the corpse.

"And where did he hide the revolver after he'd killed himself?" demanded the thin-lipped Superintendent icily, when he had somewhat recovered his aplomb.

"I'd thought of that, too," said Dr. Austin Bond, beaming. "It is always a very wise course to leave a dead body absolutely untouched until a professional man has seen it. But *looking* at the body can do no harm. You see the left-hand pocket of the overcoat. Notice how it bulges. Something unusual in it. Something that has the shape of a —— Just feel inside it, will you?"

The Superintendent, obeying, drew a revolver from the overcoat pocket of the dead man.

"Ah! Yes!" said Dr. Austin Bond. "A Webley Mark III. Quite new. You

might take out the ammunition." The Superintendent dismantled the weapon. "Yes, yes! Three chambers empty. Wonder how he used the other two! Now, where's that bullet? You see? He fired. His arm dropped, and the revolver happened to fall into the pocket."

"Fired with his left hand, did he?" asked the Superintendent, foolishly ironic.

"Certainly. A dozen years ago Franting was perhaps the finest amateur light-weight boxer in England. And one reason for it was that he bewildered his opponents by being left-handed. His lefts were much more fatal than his rights. I saw him box several times."

Whereupon Dr. Austin Bond strolled to the step of the platform near the door and picked up the fragment of very thin paper that was lying there.

"This," said he, "must have blown from the hearth to here by the draught from the window when the door was opened. It's part of a letter. You can see the burnt remains of the other part in the corner of the fender. He probably lighted the cigarette with it. Out of bravado! His last bravado! Read this."

The Superintendent read:

". . . repeat that I realize how fond you are of me, but you have killed my affection for you, and I shall leave our home to-morrow. This is absolutely final. E."

Dr. Austin Bond, having for the nth time satisfactorily demonstrated in his own unique, rapid way, that police-officers were a set of numskulls, bade the Superintendent a most courteous good evening, nodded amicably to the detective-sergeant, and left in triumph.

"I must get some mourning and go back to the flat," said Emily Franting.

She was sitting one morning in the lobby of the Palads Hotel, Copenhagen. Lomax Harder had just called on her with an English newspaper containing an account of the inquest at which the jury had returned a verdict of suicide upon the body of her late husband. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Time will put her right," thought Lomax Harder, tenderly watching her. "I was bound to do what I did. And I can keep a secret forever."

The best cipher story ever written was Poe's "The Gold Bug." S. S. Van Dine thought Melville Davisson Post's "The Great Cipher" was the second best. Here, by Elsa Barker, is a relatively unknown cipher story which we think deserves ranking with the élite.

THE KEY IN MICHAEL

by ELSA BARKER

If I had not happened to say to Dexter Drake one evening that I had often been surprised by the strain of childlike gayety in the tragic Russian temperament, I suppose I should never have heard the remarkable story of Prince Boris Vorontsov and the Key in Michael.

My friend the detective had just finished the strenuous case of the Jade Earring, and was idling after dinner, his slim athletic length stretched out on our sitting room couch.

"Yes, Howard!" Drake looked round at me with his keen black eye. "And it was that childlike strain in the tragic Russian soul which brought me one of the oddest problems I was ever called upon to solve. Indeed, I have rarely been more puzzled than I was for those few days in Paris, Nice and Monte Carlo. I'll tell you about it."

Drake swung his feet off the couch and sat up. His lethargy was gone now; his bronzed aquiline face had come suddenly alive.

"Just a moment, Howard." He rose to his feet. "I'll need that curious paper I found in the Paris studio, and the diagram I worked out from it; they're in my filing cabinet."

He turned and strode down the corridor to his study.

It was seldom that I caught the great criminal expert in a story-telling mood, seldom that he had time for story-telling. But with his immense experience in so many parts of the earth, he could have gone right on and on, I suppose, like *Scheherazade*, for a thousand and one nights.

In three minutes he was back in the sitting room, with a large yellow envelope in his hand. Suppose I leave out the quotation and double quotation marks, and just let you imagine Dexter Drake sitting there on the couch and telling the story to me. . . .

It was late March [Drake said] in the second year after the Bolshevist

horror began. Coming up from Constantinople, where I had been sent by the New York police to find a man who was dead when I got there, I decided to give myself a holiday week in Paris, see my old friends of the Paris police and make a few social calls.

For two years I had had no letter from my friend, the eighty-year-old Russian Princess Vorontsov, though I had learned in Constantinople that she had escaped from her devastated country and was back in her Paris house, in the Boulevard Suchet. Escaped from Russia — at eighty! But that did not really surprise me. She had always been an amazing person.

Her only son, Prince Michael Vorontsov, had also, I learned, got through the net of the Red Terror and had made his way into France; but he had died three months ago, in Nice. That was all I could learn about them in Constantinople. Where was Prince Boris, the old lady's grandson? They could not tell me. Was he alive? They did not know.

Now, I had known Boris Vorontsov since he was fifteen years old, though I had not seen him since the spring of 1914, when he was twenty. A delightful, impulsive, romantic young Russian he had been. What was he now — if he had survived?

But the first friend I saw in Paris assured me that Boris was with his grandmother. He had been in the old Russian army of the Czar, and he also had made his way out — but alone, and after great hardships. Was he changed? No, not on the surface — the same gay, irresponsible, childlike young soul we had always known.

"But has the old Princess any money now?" I asked.

"Nobody seems to know," my friend said. "She keeps only three servants instead of seven, and she no longer wears jewels — not a stone. She won't even talk about her escape — it's all very mysterious."

The servants, I thought, might be Russians, glad even of a roof.

"The Princess," my friend ran on, "says that the world has come to an end, but that *she* has to sit tidily on the ruins for eighteen years longer, and cultivate her neglected talents."

It sounded just like her.

Many times the old Princess had assured me that she was going to live to be ninety-eight. When she was a girl, and lady in waiting to some Russian empress whose name I have forgotten, a gypsy woman had told her that her span of life was a hundred years minus two years. Nothing could shake

her belief in it. It was one of her many delightful oddities. "I shall see you a middle-aged man with gray hair, Dexter Drake," she said to me once, years ago, when I was twenty-one and she seventy.

While the octogenarian Princess was "cultivating her neglected talents," I wondered when secret emissaries of the Reds would begin to peddle the Vorontsov jewels round the capitals of western Europe. Rumor had valued them long ago at the equivalent of a million dollars.

And Prince Michael was dead! But him I had never known well, for he was generally in Russia. I remembered a portrait of him in brilliant uniform which hung over the chimney piece in the great semidetached room the Vorontsovs called the studio — for the Princess dabbled with paints. She also wrote verses. The house in the Boulevard Suchet had once belonged to a sculptor who had sacrificed part of his garden to build the big studio. The garage was behind it, with its back against the house. If you will remember these details, they will help you to visualize my struggles with the Vorontsov puzzle. But the excitement did not begin until after Boris went down to Nice.

In the late afternoon of that first day of my holiday week in Paris, I was ringing the bell in the gate of their high-walled garden. I saw the house door slowly open, and a middle-aged manservant — a Frenchman — came to unlock the gate.

No, the Princess was not at home; she had been in Nice for the last month. But Prince Boris was there; he was alone in the studio.

"Then don't announce me," I said, and I turned down the little gravel walk to the right, and knocked on the well-remembered oaken door.

The door opened — there was a breathless moment. . . .

"Why, Dexter! Dexter Drake! I don't believe it — I don't believe it — I don't ——"

Grasping my hand, Boris drew me into the studio.

He was wearing a brown velvet house coat, and there was a gold-tipped cigarette between his slim fingers.

My friend had been right. The terrible years had but slightly changed Boris Vorontsov. The slight graceful figure was half an inch taller, maybe, and he had acquired a little yellow mustache. But the old spontaneous gayety was there still, the laughter on the lips and in the tawny eyes.

Ensconcing me in the largest easy-chair, he gave me tea from the samovar, gave me sweets, cigarettes.

Where was I staying? But I must have my things sent right over. Of course I must stay with them. Grandmamma would be so delighted. He was just starting for Nice, that night, to fetch her home. I must remain here while he was gone — a couple of days only. François would make me comfortable — he and the Russian cook. Of course I remembered his own old room at the head of the stairs? That was for me. He now occupied the Louis XIV room — the one which had been his father's. (Prince Michael, you know.) I had no engagement that evening? No? Oh, that was perfect! Then we could dine here together, early; I could see him off at the Gare de Lyon, then fetch my things from the hotel.

The lapse of years seemed unreal. This had always been their family living room; the French drawing-room in the main building was used only on formal occasions.

A few minor changes I noticed. A fine tapestry portrait of Louis XIV, with the sun disk over his head, which used to hang in Prince Michael's bedroom upstairs, was now in the studio — hung flat on the door of a large closet at the back of the room. And in the deep alcove, which with the closet divided that end of the studio, a new and magnificent lion skin covered the couch, in place of the old Kis Kilim.

"Isn't he a fine beast?" Boris smiled, when I noticed the lion. "Grandmamma found him six weeks ago in a shop in the Rue Châteaudun."

I did not say, but I thought that he must have been rather expensive.

It is better not to talk to Russians now about Russia — unless they mention it first. After a time Boris mentioned it, told me how he got out. It was a hair-raising tale, and it added a man's respect to my old affection for him. A man's and an adventurer's respect. I have been in some dangerous corners myself.

"Grandmamma says I must work now," he told me, "develop my brains, earn money. I am going to study medicine. She says life has now done the worst it can do. So we must look forward — be gay of heart."

Yes. Sitting "tidily" on the ruins.

Boris was silent for a moment. Then suddenly he looked round at me with his frank boyish eyes.

"I really don't know what we're living on," he declared. "Oh, I know what you're thinking, Dexter! But she got out of Russia with *nothing* — disguised in a peasant's rags. I believe there is something else. She helps the others — those who also have lost everything. Oh, she is deep — deep!

Her playfulness doesn't deceive me. She has always complained of my indiscretion, but before she went down to Nice — she joined an old friend there at three hours' notice — she said that on her return she had something for me to do — a difficult task. Though she smiled — you know her odd little twisted smile. I wonder ——"

When it was time for Boris to go to the station, the French manservant François got us the taxicab. The big motor car of other days was gone now. The garage behind the studio was empty.

As I left my friend in a *wagon-lit* of the Riviera express, he said, with a little flush of apology:

"If you come home late, Dexter, after François has gone to bed, you'll be sure that the gate is locked, won't you? Grandmamma never used to be nervous, but she charged me specially about the gate."

I assured him that I would even verify François' care of it. But it was not like the Princess to be fidgety.

After getting my bags from the hotel, I returned to the house. Until a late hour I sat smoking and reading in the studio, alone with the portrait of the dead Prince Michael. The fate of that whole group — stark tragedy. And the way they face life now, those who survive, is very fine.

The next day I spent most of my time with a group of old friends in the Latin Quarter. My favorite section of Paris has always been the romantic Left Bank.

It was midnight when I returned to the Vorontsov house. I found the studio lighted, and on the table a telegram for me. It was from Boris, at Nice:

> GRANDMAMMA DIED AT SEVEN THIS EVENING OF APOPLEXY SHE WILL BE BURIED HERE BESIDE MY FATHER I AM WRITING YOU THERE IS SOMETHING VERY STRANGE.

I was profoundly shocked — shocked and grieved to the heart. Dead — that amazing old lady! "*Something very strange.*" Whatever did the boy mean?

If I had not known that there were many Russians in Nice, I would have taken the first train for the south. But I decided to telegraph first, then wait for his promised letter.

The next day the Paris newspapers reported the death of the Princess

at Nice, reported the presence of her grandson in Nice, gave an account of the Vorontsov family's long and romantic history.

When Boris' letter came, I knew for certain that I had a mystery to unravel — though what it was all about, what the Princess *wanted me to do for her*, I had not the remotest conjecture.

Here is the poor boy's perplexing letter:

"My Dear Dexter:

"You *know* how I feel — I cannot write about that.

"Grandmamma was so happy when I told her you were in the house. 'Perhaps he will help you,' she cried; 'it's a task not unworthy of him.' But she would not explain — not another word.

"She was stricken at tea time. Only two hours she lived — unconscious after the first few moments. There was something she tried to say to me — she could not control her speech very well, but this much was clear:

" 'Tell Dexter — Dexter Drake — *the key — in Michael — Left Bank — 27 B.*'

"Then she sank into coma.

"What does it mean, Dexter? Was she trying to say *27 bis* — the number of some Paris house on the Left Bank? But she spoke in English — you know how she always obliged me to keep up my English — and 27 B is what it would be in that language, isn't it? But what *street* on the Left Bank? What street? And what does she want you to do there?

"She had a little bad spell, early in February. Our doctor in Paris told me — oh, *she* never mentioned it! — that a bullet grazed her side when she was hiding in the Russian forest.

"How like her it was to think of you, Dexter, when she had to leave something half told! In the old happy days when you worked with the Paris police, she was always so thrilled by your cases. I remember the Rigaud case, and your showing her how you worked out the conspirators' secret writing. How delighted she was! She loved puzzles.

"I don't know just where I stand. Even the house is not ours; it has been held on a twenty years' lease. With all her playfulness,

it was not easy to cross-question my grandmother.

"Will you come down to Nice? The funeral will be Friday morning.

"Your bewildered,

"Boris."

"The key — in Michael!" In Michael. I glanced up at that portrait over the chimney piece. Yes, what else could she mean? I would take the picture down, after the servants had gone to bed. A key — to what? Yes, why "Left Bank" and "27 B," with no street name? But perhaps the mind of the dying woman was already wandering. Or there might really be some mystery about her way of living.

The future looked dark for my young friend. Without years of professional training, what career would be open to him in France? In America? We had not jobs enough, then, for our own ex-soldiers.

You know I had just come up from Constantinople, where penniless Russian nobles were starving in droves — literally, I mean.

It was after midnight when I locked the door between the studio and the main building, drew the heavy curtains close over the windows, and set to work. From a chair I climbed onto the broad mantelpiece, got the portrait of Prince Michael off its hook, and then to the floor, where I laid it face down on a rug. Inch by inch I went around the picture at the back, between the canvas and the stretcher. I was feeling for a thin key — feeling with the tip of my pocket nail file and listening for the click of metal against metal.

I had gone halfway round when the file met an obstruction — something soft, though, not hard.

Carefully, with the file and my thumb nail, I got it out — a tightly folded piece of thin gray paper. Was *that* what she had meant?

It had been at the bottom, near the right-hand corner. She could have got it in there without taking the picture down!

My heart must have been going ninety-five to the minute, as I unfolded that sheet of gray paper. Here is what I read:

LEFT BANK, 27 B.

5-35-26-5-18-36-20-18-31-5-9-31-23-24-14-
18-3-31-27-28-24-9-11-28-12-11-27-20-26-
3-18-29-35-24-9-8-26-28-5-23-35-26-5-5-
35-12-31-8-31-9-29-20-9-24-26-5-9-26-5-

35-9-11-28-23-28-23-12

In 1739.

There is something about a cipher which sets the imagination spinning — anybody's imagination.

Though I went back to the picture on the rug and continued my search, I found nothing more. The cipher was the "key."

So I rehung the portrait of Prince Michael.

Now, I have made it my business to know a good deal about ciphers, and there were peculiarities about this one which told me at a glance that it would be difficult to read.

But my first question was this: Had the dying Princess mentioned my name just because I had always been associated in her mind with mysteries and enigmas of all sorts? This message in my hand might be written in a family code, which her grandson knew how to read. It seemed more delicate, more discreet, to show it to him before trying to read it myself. Many old families have hereditary secrets, which even the youngest of them would prefer not to share with any outsider. I might stumble on almost *any* romance — yes, any state secret — by fumbling with this "key" in Prince Michael Vorontsov.

There floated before my mind's eye a vivid picture of the Princess, at the moment of our last parting several years before, at the garden door of this very room: A vigorous little old lady, not more than five feet two inches tall, in a richly embroidered black velvet robe with creamy lace round the neck. Very black eyes — eyes incredibly young — smiling out of that splendid old face with its network of tiny wrinkles.

In parting she had kissed me on both cheeks and told me to be wise — "*Sois sage!*" as the French mother says to her child.

It is always some *little* memory which tugs at our heart when a friend is newly dead.

Before going to bed that night I hid the mysterious sheet of gray paper in a belt which I wear next my skin when traveling. And I locked the door of my bedroom. There was more than a chance that I might be the guardian of something extremely important, which I had better not meddle with until I had consulted with Boris.

But you know there is nothing which fascinates me like a mystery. Though I might try to keep my mind off the puzzle, the mind spins its own web on

the borders of sleep. That short line at the end of the figures, "*In 1739*," with the first words, "*Left Bank*," drew around themselves all sorts of memories about the left bank of the Seine in the thirties of the Eighteenth Century. I thought of the Hôtel Biron, finished in 1730; but its street number is not 27 B. Then in 1735 was built that little hunting lodge in the Ruelle des Gobelins. The year "1739" had a gruesome association, for that was the birth year of Charles Henri Sanson, the executioner under the Terror — though he belonged to another quarter of Paris. . . .

But my falling asleep did not end the events of that night. The window ledge of my room was not more than three feet from the flat roof of the garage. It was still dark when I was awakened by a slight sound outside my window.

I always know where my revolver is. In three seconds I was sending a shot — aiming low, for the legs — at a huge figure which had just risen to its feet at the far end of that roof. The man had climbed up from the garden wall — an athletic feat.

With a smothered cry he disappeared. I heard him drop on the other side of the wall; then after a moment I heard uneven running footsteps in the quiet street beyond. Hit, but not badly wounded!

Midnight marauders are no novelty in my life, but I wondered if there was some link between this one and the Vorontsov puzzle.

I rushed downstairs to the telephone, called up the police, the Sûreté, made myself known to them, and reported the case.

"There's a street lamp on the corner," I said, "and I saw the broad face of a man, his huge bulk, the dark cap he wore. He made off limping in the direction of the railway track. If you catch him to-night, telephone me" (I gave the number) "and I will come down and identify him. Otherwise it will have to wait two or three days, until I come back from Nice. Please give my regards to Inspector Lagrange and the Chief."

I spent the rest of the night on that lion-skin couch in the studio, to be near the telephone. The servants had awakened at the sound of the shot, but I reassured them and sent them back to bed.

The police did not report a capture that night, but the next morning François and I found bloodstains on the garden wall. I told the butler that some thief had probably read in the newspaper of the family's absence in the south, and was after the silver.

I was not so sure of it myself. Until I knew what that cryptograph meant,

I was keeping an open mind. The face I had seen in the light of the street lamp was decidedly Russian. . . .

My meeting with Boris in Nice was affecting. He had been deeply attached to his grandmother.

When I showed him the "key," his face went white.

"But I know nothing about it — nothing," he gasped.

We were sitting in my bedroom in the hotel.

"And the Princess never taught you a cipher," I asked, "never talked about one? Neither she nor your father?"

"Never anything definite. But she was always interested in mysteries — after she met *you*. Five or six years ago, when you told us about the Rigaud case and the secret writing, you remember how keen she was. This paper is in her handwriting. Of course it may be a copy, but if so, who has the original? And how did it come to be hidden in my father's portrait?"

I got up and walked the floor, thinking. Boris was watching me, and there was a glint of excitement behind the grief in his eyes.

I stopped beside his chair, and looked down at him.

"Some secret of great importance may be hidden here," I said. "That is probably what she intended to tell you, on her return to Paris. Perhaps she had come to question the gypsy's prophecy that she would live to be ninety-eight."

The quick tears filled his eyes — spilled over.

"But I never could read it, Dexter — never in a thousand years."

"I'm sure that you couldn't. And I'm sure now that she meant me to help you with this, when she said, 'Tell Dexter Drake.' If she had had time, if she could have controlled her speech, she would doubtless have told you all the details of whatever secret is hidden here. I feel that she laid a charge upon me, with her dying breath."

The dear boy asked me to read the cipher — as if it had been a sheet of music! He had always believed I could do anything.

I sat down again, and took the paper from his hand. Then for the first time I examined it closely.

The highest number, *36*, and the lowest, *3*, proved that the letter significators do not go straight from *1 to 26*, the number of letters in the English alphabet. There was a definite system of skipping, therefore. "*Left Bank — in 1739*" pointed clearly enough to the English language.

"As you see," I said, "there is no division between the words. That makes it immensely more difficult to read."

And if this was a secret writing which the Princess had made herself, she was clever enough to avoid the obvious. She would never copy a ready-made cryptogram. I believed from the first that that very ingenious creation was hers.

There were sixty-seven numbers in all. I made a little table which showed that there were eighteen *different* numbers used.

Boris had been watching me in silence, nervously pulling at his little golden mustache. Suddenly he leaned forward:

"Dexter! Do you think — you know my father was very close to the Czar. Though this paper is in Grandmamma's writing, I wonder ——"

The same question had occurred to me. But I told myself that when I had read the paper, when I knew what the Princess wanted me to do, I could judge for myself whether I would go on with it.

Let me tell you briefly — for the reading of ciphers is a fine art — how I confidently started on my labors. I made another table, which showed the number of times each symbol was used.

You know, of course, that the letter "*e*" and the word "*the*" appear oftener than any others, in English. As the figure "5" appeared oftenest, eight times, was it "*e*"? Of the seven three-number combinations *ending* in 5, two were alike — *35–26–5*. Ah! Had I found the word "*the*"? Once, also, 5 was doubled as "*e*" is constantly doubled, in such words as "*free*," and "*street*." But when I glanced at the first five numbers, *5–35–26–5–18* — oh, if *35–26–5* was "*the*," then the writing began with "*Ethe—*," which was only possible if the opening word was "*ether*" or some of its derivatives and if *18* was "*r*." It took me some time to prove that *18* could not be "*r*," and also that 5 did not behave elsewhere like "*e*." Neither did 9, which appeared seven times, nor *26*, which appeared six times.

"Well, *well!*" I exclaimed.

After an hour I had convinced myself that the word "*the*" did not appear in that writing *at all*, and that even the letter "*e*" must be well down on the list.

Then I knew — I knew that infinite care and labor had been expended upon this cipher, that the very words composing the message had been deliberately *chosen* by one who knew how to avoid the obvious frequencies of the letters.

I drew a long breath. I sat back in my chair.

"Is it going to be difficult, Dexter?"

"I'm afraid so. Your wonderful grandmother seems to have created a masterpiece of cryptography."

Boris gave me his affectionate smile.

"But you think she composed it herself?"

I nodded.

"But why, why?"

"How can I possibly tell, until I have read it?"

"But what can that be at the bottom," he asked, "*In 1739?*"

"Being the clearest thing, on the surface," I said, "it is probably not what it seems."

Then I told him about the man on the garage roof.

"But your description," he cried, "makes me think of Sergey Kovalchuk. He came from one of our Russian estates and he was our Paris gardener until 1914. Three months ago he came to see Grandmamma. He was quite ragged. She gave him food, gave him money, clothes, and she got him a job somewhere. With whom? Oh, I don't remember!"

I lost no time in telegraphing my old friend Inspector Lagrange to look for one Sergey Kovalchuk, and ascertain if his legs were uninjured. It is generally easy to find a foreigner in Paris.

The funeral of the Princess Vorontsov, in one of the Russian churches of Nice, was very impressive. What richness of temperament there is in those Slavs!

But in the late afternoon I left Boris with his Russian friends and went away by myself. I wanted to think, and all day I had not had a moment alone. I strolled up to the station, and took the first train for Monte Carlo. You know it is only ten miles from Nice to the gamblers' Mecca, and that view of the Mediterranean always frees something in me.

The Princess — an original soul she was — would have preferred that I mourn her that night in my own way.

I dined alone on the terrace and thought of her. In the days of her wealth she had told me gayly many a story of winning and losing at Monte Carlo. She had always insisted that some day a clever brain would "dig out the fault" in the roulette wheel and milk the Casino cow as dry as a rock. Prince Michael, too, I remembered, had a weakness for watching the spin of the ivory ball. And he also had died down here.

After dinner I strolled into the Casino.

Oh, I had not abandoned the problem of the cipher! Having failed to make head or tail of it, I was giving my mind that refreshment which acts on our thought as a bath acts on the body. I went into one of the gaming rooms — not to play, but to watch.

As I stood near one table, right before me were two middle-aged American women, a fat one and a thin one. The fat one, as I judged from their comments, was new to the Riviera. She wanted to play; but the thin one was trying to dissuade her with the warning that in the end the Casino bank always wins and the players lose, because of the zero at the head of the wheel — the bank's rake-off.

As I listened, slightly amused, an idea came to me. Could the Princess Vorontsov have been winning at the gaming tables the money to keep herself going? The idea was not nearly so wild as it sounds. As everyone knows, many old ladies seem to make some sort of living at the tables, playing those little conservative systems of theirs.

Late that night, on my return to Nice, I went to Boris' room and asked him if his grandmother had been playing.

"Winning, you mean? But I really don't know."

He then showed me her Paris bank book, which he had just found. Five months ago the Princess had deposited fifteen thousand francs, three months ago twenty thousand francs. Those figures were something to think about.

But neither of us wanted to question the Casino people, nor anyone else. It would have seemed disrespectful of the dead woman.

Again Boris talked of the little he knew about her escape, how she had lain in the forest at night, had been shot at, had been half drowned. .

"My father, you know, was not with her," he said. "They found each other in France. All her courage and gayety — oh, she was just trying to keep *me* in good spirits! But of course I can't study medicine now. How many years does it take? I shall have to give up the lease of the dear house, sell the furniture — just to exist, until I get some kind of work to do."

The next day we returned to Paris, and I telephoned Inspector Lagrange at the Sûreté. Yes, the police had got Sergey Kovalchuk. At first he was half hysterical, babbling about some letter from his mother in Russia. When asked why he tried to enter the house in the Boulevard Suchet, he had muttered, "Looking for something." Then he became stubbornly silent.

"We had better see Sergey to-morrow," I said to Boris, "and try to make him confess just *what* he was looking for."

"Oh, Dexter! It might have something to do with our puzzle!"

I intended to shut myself up, in that quiet house behind the garden, and wrestle with the "key in Michael." Whether it solved my friend's problem, or got him into deeper trouble, we had to know what it meant. There is something hypnotic about a mystery.

After Boris went to bed that night, in the Louis XIV room which had been Prince Michael's, I spent two full hours figuring out combinations of those numbers. Yes, the frequencies were all wrong. After "*e*" the natural succession runs roughly, *t*, *a*, *o*, *i*, *n*, *s*, *h*; "*r*" and "*u*" are well down on the list. But that knowledge was getting me nowhere.

Then I tried more recondite systems. I had already tried reading it backward, even tried French, German, Italian, with the same negative result. Suppose it were written in Russian, after all?

Of course, "*27 B*" might have nothing to do with a house on the Left Bank. Perhaps *27* was the letter "*b*." But there are eight letters, vowels and consonants, which can follow "*b*" in our language, and probably five thousand words which begin with "*b*."

Piqued and exasperated, I finally went to bed.

You know how, as we doze off to sleep, any casual words we have heard in the last twenty-four hours or so may go floating through the mind. I heard again that thin American woman in the gaming room telling the fat one, "In the long run the bank always wins." In my half-sleeping mind, *bank* got mixed up with "*Left Bank*" and "*27 B*." Then one-half of my brain was reminding the other half that *26*, not *27*, was at the *left* of the bank's zero on the roulette wheel.

My heart began pounding. I sat up in bed — broad awake.

"*Left Bank, 27 B, 26* ——"

Now what *did* follow *26*, at the left of the wheel? Surely not *27*, for the numbers in the circle are all placed irregularly. I had not played roulette for years.

"But it might be! It might be the *key!*" I cried aloud.

I leaped out of bed. In my bare feet I rushed down the hall and threw open the door of my friend's room, switched on the light.

"Boris! Boris, wake up! Have you got a roulette book?"

"W-wh-what?" he answered drowsily.

"Have you got a roulette book?" I repeated rather impatiently.

"A — a what?"

I plumped down on the side of the bed.

"Any book on roulette. You *must* have something of the kind in the house. Everybody who knows the Riviera —— Wake up!"

"B-but I am awake. There must be one" — a deep sigh — "somewhere in the house. I'll look — in the morning."

"No, no! I must have it now. It's about the cipher."

That woke him all right.

"I'm not sure," I explained, as he threw on his dressing gown and slippers. "I just had a sudden idea — I half dreamed it. But that's what acumen is, nine times out of ten — a quick grab at some floating subconscious perception."

"We'll try the bookshelves in the studio first," Boris said.

I stopped in my room to snatch a few garments, then followed him downstairs.

In the studio we switched on all the lights and set to work, hunting along the shelves.

One of the first books I saw bore the title, "Cryptography." So the Princess *had* studied the subject!

It was Boris who found the roulette book.

"Look!" he cried. "It has the design of the wheel as a frontispiece!"

I grabbed it — examined it hurriedly.

To the left of the zero, "the Bank," the numbers ran *26*, *3*, *35* and so forth. The *27* was way around to the right, on the lower arc.

"But wait!" I cried. And I counted rapidly backward from *27*. . . . "Why, Boris! There's just the right number of letters, twenty-six, going round to the left from *27* to *26*, which is next to the zero, '*the Bank*.' So *26* could be *a*."

"Dexter! You don't *mean* it!" He clutched my arm excitedly.

"If it begins at the left of the Bank, the zero," I said, "and if *26* should be *a* and *27* be *b*, then — don't you see? — the order of letters must jump *back and forth* between them. Then *3*, next to *26 a*, would be *c*, and *13*, next to *27 b*, would be *d*, and so on."

I began to write down the letters beside the numbers on the wheel diagram. Of course I might be chasing a will-o'-the-wisp, but suppose it should be the solution! Oh, it would have been clever — infernally clever of her

to have thought out such a thing!

Here is the scale I made. The black and red of the roulette wheel do not show, but the colors played no part in the Key in Michael.

My money belt was still round my waist. In three seconds I had the gray sheet of paper in my hands, and was jotting down the numbers on another sheet, with the tentative letters beneath them. After the first four letters, I shouted:

"It works! Man alive, it works! I have got a word already — the word is *rear*."

Then I ran right on to the end without stopping.

Here is what I had!

5-35-26-5-18-36-20-18-31-5-9-31-23-24-14-18-
R e a r o f y o u r s u n t w o
3-31-27-28-24-9-11-28-12-11-27-20-26-3-18-29-
c u b i t s h i g h b y a c o m
35-24-9-8-26-28-5-23-35-26-5-5-35-12-31-8-31-9-
e t s l a i r n e a r r e g u l u s
29-20-9-24-26-5-9-26-5-35-9-11-28-23-28-23-12
m y s t a r s a r e s h i n i n g.

In 1739

It was the work of a moment to separate the words:

"*Rear of your sun,*
Two cubits high,
By a comet's lair,
Near Regulus,
My stars are shining."

"How she piled up the *r's*," I cried, "by using '*rear*,' '*near*' and '*lair*' and the *u's* by '*cubits*' and '*Regulus*'! Look at the *s's*, too! How she kept down the number of *e's*, did not once use the word '*the*,' and threw out all the usual frequencies! A technical masterpiece!"

"But, Dexter! What does it *mean?* Would she have appealed to you with her dying breath, just to decipher a poem in free verse?"

"Of *course* not. Can't you see — can't you read between the lines? What do you fancy she means when she says her stars are shining?"

"Stars?" His tawny eyes widened with wonder.

"Yes, what would she hide in a difficult code, and doubly hide again in these cryptic lines?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Something on the Left Bank — but how stupid of me! Of course '*Left Bank*' and the '*27 B*' were only the key to the *cipher itself*."

His face fell. He looked around for a cigarette, lighted one.

"It seems to me, Dexter, that we're just where we were before."

"Does it? Does it?" I strode up and down the studio.

Boris, who had dropped down in a chair, looked round at me suddenly, and there was a look of awe on his face:

"It's just as if she were speaking to us from another dimension of space — '*by a comet's lair, near Regulus, behind the sun!*' "

Then I took from the shelf that book I had found, "Cryptography," and showed it to him.

"I know now — know for sure," I said, "that this cipher was written for *you*. Had she lived, on her return from the south she intended to give you the Key in Michael, give you this book on Cryptography, and then watch your struggles with them. The secret concealed in those figures will change your whole life. There is no other possible inference now. And how like her it was to make a great *game* of it! 'Perhaps Dexter will help you,' she said,

when she knew I was in the house. Gay of heart, you know. Courage and gayety. The echo of tragedy under the childlike laughter."

If you could have seen that boy's face!

"Now you ought to know what she meant by '*your sun*' — yours," I said. "Something concrete — some object, when she says '*rear of*.' Something known to yourself and your grandmother. Think, Boris, think!"

"Why — she gave me a sunset picture; it's hanging in my room."

We rushed upstairs again.

Yes, there was the sunset hung high, at least five feet from the floor, and it was only a small canvas.

"But she says 'two *cubits high*,' Boris, and two English cubits are only three feet — not five or six. And look — only a blank wall behind it."

I sounded the wall — no sign of a secret hiding-place.

Then I tried another tack. "What did your grandmother ever say about a *comet?* I want the comet's lair."

"Why — why, they used to call her motor car the Comet. It went so fast, you know, and it had a vapory tail. But she gave it to the French government in the early days of the war."

"The garage!" I cried. "*The Comet's lair!* But she says '*by*' a comet's lair — not in it. The studio is '*by*' the lair." And I rushed downstairs again.

As I passed through the studio door, my eye lighted on something which brought me up with a start.

"I'm just going to *think* this out now," I said. "Will you lie down over there, on the couch in the alcove, and be very quiet?"

Boris stretched himself out on the lion skin from the Rue Châteaudun. I went and sat down in the far corner of the room.

"How kind you are, Dexter, to take all this trouble for me!"

"Kind? But I wouldn't have missed this for worlds! It's a case of the sort which your grandmother used to delight in. I have everything *now*, but one link in the chain."

We were both utterly still for a minute or two.

"*Your* sun!" I leaped to my feet. "I've got it."

He came running from the alcove — breathless with excitement.

I pointed to that Louis XIV tapestry which hung, as I have told you, on the door of the closet, which with the alcove divided that end of the studio.

"When did she bring that tapestry down from your father's room — *your* room now?"

"Let me see — yes, the very same day she brought home the lion."

"Of course, of course! As every high school child has learned, Louis XIV was the *sun* king, the *Roi Soleil;* the sun disk was his emblem. It's all over the royal buildings of his time, and look at it — there at the top of the tapestry. *Your* Louis XIV room, *your* tapestry, your *sun*, therefore. 'Rear of your sun,' in that closet."

"But she says, '*near Regulus.*' "

"Of course it's near Regulus. Don't you know the star Regulus is in the sign Leo, the Lion? Your grandmother bought that lion skin for the alcove six weeks ago, you told me. So *that* was the time when she found the word *Regulus*, which had *u's* enough in it to help make that cipher obscure. Then she ran down to Nice — postponing the revelation until her return. I've not seen the inside of that closet, but closet and alcove are backed by the comet's lair, and behind your sun-king tapestry, two cubits high, three feet, we shall find ——"

He leaped at the door, threw it open, switched on the electric light which hung on a cord from the ceiling. On the closet floor were some cardboard boxes containing paint tubes, a palette, paint rags; and on the back wall was hung an old linen curtain, soiled and discolored.

The closet was shallower than the alcove, by fully two feet.

I drew the curtain aside — revealing a wall of paneled wood. The top of the lower panel was about three feet from the floor.

"Two cubits high," I said. And I began running my fingers along the top of the panel, feeling, pressing here and there for a concealed spring. That is one of my little detective specialties, you know.

Suddenly, noiselessly, so delicate was the mechanism, the panel tipped over from the top on its oiled hinges.

The smoke-gray steel of a small safe caught the light from the overhead lamp.

"Oh — *oh!* I never knew it was there!" Boris cried. "But the combination! We haven't the combination!"

"Yes, we have. Look at the dial. It's a double-combination lock, with a double radiating disk. It requires both letters and numbers to get into this hiding place of your wonderful grandmother's. Suppose we try, '*In 1739?*' I kept that for the last. I thought it was not what it seemed."

I dropped on one knee beside the safe. On the outer ring of the disk I picked out the letters "*i-n*," then on the inner ring I picked out "*1-7-3-9*,"

and gave a twirl.

But nothing happened — nothing. For a second I was nonplused.

"Of course, of course!" I cried. "We have to reverse it, in the code, turn the letters into numbers, the numbers into letters. But wasn't it witty of her, to use '*in*' to get into a safe!"

It took only a moment. In the code, "*i-n*" became "*2823*" and "*1-7-3-9*" (as you will see by a glance at my diagram of the roulette wheel) became the letters "*z-k-c-s*," a "word" which no safe breaker ever would think of.

I picked at the double-disk again, and my heart was going fast.

Another twirl — the safe door swung open.

"But Dexter! It's only — why, it's only a pile of old rags!"

A chill ran up my spine. I spoke under my breath:

"You take them out — you — they are sacred — those rags ——"

He made a little purring noise in his throat.

Leaning forward, with trembling hands he drew out something and held it up — a nondescript woolen garment, half dress, half cloak.

"Wait a moment," I gasped; "there are other things here."

I drew forth a small, worn leather bag, with a strap to go around the neck. Behind it on the floor of the safe were a small revolver and a folded paper.

Then together we left the closet. Sitting down on the floor of the studio, facing each other, we reverently spread out the things between us.

"The revolver" — I touched it with awe — "that was of course for herself — if she should be taken by the Red soldiers."

The tears were running down Boris' face. My own eyes were wet.

I opened that worn leather bag, took out the contents: A little packet of tea, another of salt, a comb, a cheap knife, fork and spoon. A small brandy flask — empty.

Then I unfolded that paper — gave it to Boris, without a word.

It was a Russian passport. You know Russians have to have "papers," to go from one village to another in safety.

But this was the passport of one "Anna Kovalchuk, seamstress."

Kovalchuk! The name of that man on the garage roof.

Boris shook his head — he knew nothing about this.

I reached over and touched his hand. "Look ——"

I was pointing to a round hole under one of the arms of that woolen garment — dull stains there were, too.

"A bullet hole," I whispered. "The bullet passed through and out — see

the other side of that seam."

He tried to speak — choked. He had seen those dull stains.

I was feeling the *inside* of that rough woolen garment, and now I took Boris' hand, flexed the fingers and pressed them against the coarse lining around the waist of it.

"Dexter!"

I thought he was going to faint.

"Steady," I breathed, "steady, dear boy. Bring the scissors — that's her little sewing basket there on the table."

It pulled him together, having something to do.

He got me the scissors, then just dropped down on the floor again, facing me.

In two seconds I held out my hand, palm upward — *a great gleaming emerald!*

The Vorontsov jewels! A million dollars' worth! Eighty years old, she had got out of Russia with them — torn from their settings, and sewn in the lining of that garment of the peasant seamstress.

For herself, she could never have done it. But for him ——

After half an hour of cutting and ripping I had a large bowl full of priceless great stones — diamonds, rubies, pearls, emeralds, sapphires. And there were a few smaller stones, like those two which she must have sold for the fifteen and twenty thousand francs.

Why hadn't she told her grandson? Because she wanted him to *work*, not idle away his young life. But when she had that bad spell early in February, she must have realized that it was no longer safe to withhold the knowledge from him. He should work for it, though — labor and think and develop his brains. A great game she would make of it. Can't you imagine the shine of those brilliant old eyes of hers — eyes so incredibly young in that splendid old wrinkled face of hers — as she laughingly helped him with hints now and then to decipher the cryptograph? And when at last they had opened the safe — when he *saw* what she had done for him!

"*Sois sage!* Study and work, my child, for we Russians have learned how uncertain wealth is."

Sergey Kovalchuk confessed to Boris and me the next day. In that letter from his mother, Anna Kovalchuk, she wrote him about *selling* the passport and dress to the Princess, who had paid her for them with a diamond. When Sergey learned that the Princess was dead, and that her grandson was absent

from home, he had thought there might be other diamonds in the house.

That wildly grateful young Boris wanted to share the Vorontsov jewels with me! It took me the rest of my holiday week in Paris to persuade him that I had just had the time of my life in finding them for him, that they were his lawful inheritance, like any other estate, but that they ought to be sold now and the money wisely invested. Of course I accepted one stone — oh, it was a big one! — as a souvenir of the Princess. It is still in a safe deposit vault in Paris. When I'm tired of this business of criminal hunting, I'll sell it and buy a nice house — somewhere on the *Left Bank*.

So Dexter Drake ended his story of the Key in Michael, sitting there on the couch in our living room in New York, many years afterwards.

"Of course, Howard," he added, after a moment of musing, "the jewels were in no danger, so long as nobody knew that she had escaped with them. The safe had probably been in that closet for years; she had only to have the combination changed. Who would look for a secret writing between the canvas and stretcher of a portrait over the mantelpiece? And even on the unimaginable chance that the paper was found and deciphered, who would fancy that a few lines of *vers libre* about sun, stars and comets, had anything to do with the Vorontsov jewels?"

"Who," I replied, "except you, would have fancied it!"

"Ah!" The great detective gave me his quick bright-eyed smile. "But you are forgetting the strange message to me from the dying woman. And even I, you remember, did not find it so easy to read that ingenious, that *unique* cipher, worked out on the numbers of the roulette wheel!"

We are always happy to play host to Miss Hildegarde Withers, one of our favorite female detectives. Stuart Palmer proves that something new can be woven about a fingerprint.

THE BLUE FINGERPRINT

by STUART PALMER

"THIS is a massacre, not an auction sale!" Auctioneer Paul Varden of the Sutton Galleries had worked himself up into a fine frenzy, but it seemed that nobody wanted to buy a mahogany wardrobe so heavy that it took three men to lift it onto the platform.

"Do I hear one hundred dollars? Do I hear seventy-five?" Varden appealed directly to a man who was drowsing in one of the aisle seats beside the only pretty girl in the place. "Mr. Hamish, surely as an art buyer you won't let this fine solid mahogany heirloom slip out of your hands?"

Mr. Hamish, star customer of the evening, had a long beaked face somewhat resembling that of an American eagle. "Do you say seventy-five, Mr. Hamish?" the auctioneer urged. Then the girl — she wore her hair and her tweed suit as neatly as a private secretary should but was too pretty even so — touched the man beside her on the arm. He opened his eyes, listened to her soft whisper, and looked up at the platform. Then Mr. Hamish very delicately touched his nose with thumb and forefinger.

The auctioneer gulped a glass of water, decided upon an entirely different attack. "Well, ladies and gentlemen, if you don't care for the looks of the wardrobe, just look at the room in it. George!" —— he summoned a gigantic Negro —— "Open those doors so everybody can see. Why, it's big enough for a bar, big enough so you could tip it over, put in an outboard motor, and have a speedboat!" The crowd tittered.

Even Hamish smiled faintly, said something to the girl beside him. "Thirty dollars," she sang out, in a clear sweet voice.

"Thirty, thirty, thirty — do I hear fifty?" Varden beamed.

The colored boy had pulled out all the drawers on the left side of the big wardrobe, but the full-length door on the right eluded him. George, with keys and screwdriver, fought at the tightly wedged door, mumbling. Mr. Hamish whispered again to his secretary, who immediately raised her hand.

"Don't bother, please. All Mr. Hamish wants is the wood, and it mustn't be scratched."

"That will do then, George. You may relax. Now, ladies and gentlemen, do I hear fifty dollars? Thirty dollars once, thirty dollars twice . . ."

He raised his hammer hastily, but before it could fall there was the screech of metal as something gave way under the pressure of the screwdriver in the hands of the persevering colored boy.

Time stood still for a second or a century, and the room was so silent that in the back row Miss Hildegarde Withers could hear the tick of the old-fashioned watch pinned to her bosom.

The wardrobe door was wide open, disclosing the large cavity within. No — not a cavity, for slowly and with infinite weariness the plump body of a man, his face a dreadful blackish purple, came sliding out. Stiff and wooden, it sprawled and bumped down the steps of the auction platform and slid to a contorted rest against the ankles of the people in the front row.

Like heat lightning on a summer night were the flares of the official photographers, and the heavy, resolute tread of detectives echoed dully in the empty auction hall. There were louder echoes from the galleries' offices at the rear, into which the crowd had been herded without ceremony.

"For no reason!" Auctioneer Varden was complaining. "These people can't be involved in any way, because whoever put the body into that wardrobe must have done it when it was downstairs in the showrooms during the week. . . ."

"Louis Hamish, Hotel Elleston," wrote down the placid sergeant in charge, who was going through the crowd with his notebook.

"Bianca Riley, 25 Barrow Street," said the pretty secretary. Every moment or so she looked down at the tiny jeweled watch on her wrist.

"The young man will wait," said a comforting voice beside her, and the girl looked up into the friendly, equine visage of a middle-aged spinster.

Bianca smiled in spite of herself. "I — I'm afraid not. His train — the train is due in just four minutes."

"All right, folks," the police sergeant announced. "The Inspector will see you now. One at a time into the next room. . . ."

The name on the glass of the door was "Joel Klaus, Manager" but at the wide polished desk of Mr. Klaus sat Oscar Piper, a large unlighted cigar in his mouth and a stern expression on his face. He whirled to face his first vic-

tim, and then the cigar dropped. "Hildegarde!"

"Yes, Oscar," said Miss Withers. The two old sparring-partners faced each other warily. "Was the dead man a Doctor Brotherly?"

He nodded. "Doctor Carl Brotherly, collector. Identified by staff of the galleries as regular customer. Married, lives at 33 Denton Place."

"I know," Miss Withers said. "I was over there this afternoon. Mrs. Brotherly retained me to find her husband. He'd been missing three days, but called up in the morning and left a message telling her not to worry.

"Her brother, who lives with them, insisted that she shouldn't call the police. She didn't want to, either, because it appears that Brotherly took her pearls to be strung when he left home. . . ."

There was a knock on the hall door, and the Inspector spoke briefly to a Headquarters detective. Then he faced Miss Withers again. "Doc Bloom's been here," he announced. "Says Brotherly died of strangulation by the silk scarf that was around his neck. What's more, he died at least forty-eight hours ago! So there's no use holding those people in there." He gave orders to the sergeant.

"With Brotherly dying two days ago, it certainly knocks the skids from under your story about the telephone call. . . ."

"Does it, Oscar?" Miss Withers tapped a pencil against her teeth. "On the contrary, I should say that it makes it much more interesting."

"I've got something interesting, too," Piper told her. "Something we found while searching the body, tucked inside his shirt."

"Not the string of pearls?"

"No, nothing like that. It was this." And the Inspector produced a photograph, enlarged to post-card size, of a fingerprint. It showed signs of having been crumpled, then straightened.

The schoolteacher frowned. "But — he was a rich collector of art objects, not a detective!"

"This is no police print," Piper told her. "Amateur photo. My guess is that somebody stole something out of Brotherly's collection and he was trying to solve the case himself from a print they left. Anyway, we'll check it soon enough."

They came out into the hall, stood aside to let white uniformed men go by with their big wicker basket destined for the Morgue. "Which means that I've got to dig up the next of kin and take them down to give formal identification. Want to tag along, Hildegarde?"

Miss Withers would forego the pleasure. She passed down the stairs and out of the place. Somehow her case was slipping out of her fingers — her first real private case.

She turned westward at the corner, leaving Madison Avenue and its crowd of curious spectators. Fifty-second Street was dark, deserted except for an empty sedan of great age and equally great prestige which waited against the curb. Deserted — and as Miss Withers immediately noticed, unlocked. That in itself was odd, and Miss Withers was interested in odd things. She peered inside. . . .

Then, to her amazement, she heard somebody signaling her, in a low whistle. Looking all around, she saw nothing but office buildings on the corner, the long deserted street of apartments.

The whistle came again, and an urgent cry, "Bianca!"

Then she looked up, and caught a momentary glimpse of a face at a high window. As she stared, there came swiftly down to her a dark object tied to a cord, as a spider drops from its web.

Miss Withers caught it blankly, felt the loosened string descend after it. She was holding a faded, nondescript painting not ten inches square!

Before she could make any decision about what to do with this manna sent from Heaven, the thing was taken from her grasp. It was the secretary, Bianca Riley, and she was very out of breath from running. "Oh, thank you!" cried the girl. "I should have been here, but I simply had to try to make a telephone call. How in the world ——"

"Just what is this?" Miss Withers demanded. "Second-story job?"

The Riley girl was amused. "Of course not! That's the rear window of the auction rooms up there! The police wouldn't let us take away even the small articles Mr. Hamish purchased at the sale tonight, so we just had to do something. Isn't red tape stupid? You see, Mr. Hamish simply insists on personally taking away what he buys. . . ."

"He seems an opinionated gentleman, this employer of yours."

Bianca, clutching the picture to her heart, said, "He's the wisest, kindest man in the world. No matter what anybody says."

"Even if he keeps you working after hours when you're expecting a young man on the train?" But the meddlesome schoolteacher did not get an answer to this, for there were footsteps behind her. They were joined by a tall, weary man with an eagle face.

He looked at the schoolteacher, seemed to take in the situation without

batting an eye. "Oh, good evening. You'll excuse us ——" And as he motioned, Bianca Riley slid behind the wheel of the car.

Hamish started to get into the car. "Drive on, Bianca," he ordered.

"Not so fast!" And Miss Hildegarde Withers tore at her handbag, found a police whistle, and blew upon it a tremendous blast.

Eagle-face was wide awake at last. "Good God, woman!" And then to her amazed surprise the schoolteacher found herself jerked rudely inside the sedan. The door slammed and the car roared headlong away.

Miss Withers spoke first. "Kidnaping, eh? Housebreaking, theft . . ."

"Applesauce," Hamish broke in. They turned up Seventh Avenue. "Okay, Bianca." The car stopped directly under a street lamp. Miss Withers gasped, being beyond words. But Hamish only stepped out politely, held the door for Miss Withers, who emerged with most of her dignity intact, her curiosity aflame.

"I owe you an explanation," said he gently. "But I couldn't give it there. You see this picture?"

Miss Withers saw. It was an oil, painted, it seemed, upon wood, in a battered frame. As far as she could tell it was a rather painstakingly executed portrait of a youngish man with whiskers, wearing a sort of blue velvet cap. It was very dirty.

"I bought this tonight," Hamish said. "For less than a hundred dollars. I couldn't wait for police permission. I didn't want to take it past the newspaper men at the door. You see, I may be wrong, but there's a chance that this is an authentic self-portrait of Hans Holbein, the great court painter to Henry VIII of England. It has something that tells me —" He shrugged. "Only study and restoration will tell the truth."

Miss Withers was telling the Inspector all about it down at Centre Street next morning. And then Miss Withers frowned, indicating his skinned knuckles. "More quiet work in the back room?" she accused.

"It was right here, about half an hour," he confessed. "The widow and her brother, a Mr. Bogart, were here."

Miss Withers nodded. "The man who didn't want Mrs. Brotherly to go to the police? A little suspicious, Oscar."

He agreed. "Seems that they really came down to raise Cain because no pearls and no money were found on the dead man. Bogart even went so far as to say that some of my boys on the Squad could tell where the pearls

had gone!"

Piper's jaw was tight and strained, for he was proud of his boys. "We had a little difference of opinion about that, and — he missed with his left and I didn't. But it jarred one thing out of him. Bogart confessed why he hadn't let his sister go to the police. It was this telegram, received the day before yesterday. And if you can make anything out of it . . ."

MUST DISAPPEAR BREAK GENTLY TO ANGELA WILL CABLE LATER ABSOLUTE SECRECY IMPORTANT GET RID OF GREEN BUDDHA IN LIBRARY AT ONCE CARL

Miss Withers handed it back. "Well, did he?"

"Did he what?"

"Get rid of the green Buddha?"

Piper snorted. "Bogart and Mrs. Brotherly said they did nothing of the kind. Impossible — because for years Dr. Brotherly has been collecting oriental statuettes. There are nearly a hundred Buddhas in that library, and more than half of them green!"

Miss Hildegarde Withers frowned thoughtfully. "By the way, did you make anything of that fingerprint the dead man was carrying?" She picked up the print from his desk.

Piper shook his head. "Doesn't check with anything in our files or at the D. J. down at Washington. Nor with any suspect in this case!"

"Such a shame, Oscar! To have a nice, big, enlarged fingerprint and not have it fit anywhere. Mind if I try?"

"Hop to it, Hildegarde. Anything else I can do for you?"

"There is," she said, after pondering. "Do you happen to have a copy of the auction catalogue for last night?" He had, it developed, a sheaf of them, all wearing on the cover the ornate coat of arms of the Sutton Galleries. Page one she passed over, page two began:

14. Sung porcelains, pair
15. Georgian Dining Table
16. T'ang Horse
17. Painting, Man in Blue Hat
18. Painting, Nude by F. Van Brown
19. Mahogany Wardrobe, Victorian

The phone rang, and Piper answered. Looking up, he said: "You may be interested to know that the last purchase Brotherly made at the Sutton

Galleries was three weeks ago, when he bought a Buddha made of green malachite!"

"A clue, anyway. That's what this case needs."

"What this case needs is ——" Piper stopped as a white-haired, stooped old man appeared in the doorway without being announced. "Oh, come on in, Max! You know Miss Withers, don't you?"

Max Van Donnen expressed guttural delight at the meeting. "I had results," he told the Inspector. He produced a square of black cardboard, upon which had been neatly glued some shreds of broken glass.

"From the rubber heels of the dead man," Piper explained to his guest. "Plus some bits of glass my boys picked up in the corner of the auction showroom, where the wardrobe stood. Well, Max, did you get enough to send out to the opticians?"

The lab expert shrugged. "Enough, Inspector, to show that diss iss not broken spectacles, like we thought. It is only part of a magnifying glass!"

"Thanks, Max. Rotten luck. We can trace eyeglasses, but not magnifying glasses. . . ." He looked up, surprised. "Where're you off to, Hildegarde?"

"The Metropolitan Museum, if you must know."

He grinned at her. "Going to check that fingerprint with the mummies up there at the museum?"

"Something like that, yes." And, afire with a new excitement, the schoolteacher hurried out.

Dismissing her taxi on the Avenue, Miss Withers ran up the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Straight to the information desk she went. Two minutes later she was in another taxi, headed back to Centre Street.

She burst in upon the Inspector without ceremony. "No wonder your men couldn't trace that fingerprint!" she announced happily. "Oscar Piper, do you know whose it is?"

"Huh?" The Inspector squared his shoulders. "Who is the guy and where can we nab him?"

"The name," said Miss Hildegarde Withers gently, "is Holbein. Hans Holbein, and you might be able to dig him up in Utrecht Cemetery, Holland, where he's been for some hundreds of years."

"Hildegarde, are you out of your wits?"

There was a knock at the door, and the desk sergeant put his head in. "Excuse me, Inspector, but that Boy Scout is here again, and he —"

"I've just got to see you," announced a tall, obviously unhappy young

man, pushing his way through the doorway. He was clad in the dress uniform of a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Piper reddened. "Now look here, I told you to go to the Bureau of Missing Persons, didn't I?"

"Yes sir, I know." The stalwart youth stood at attention. "But they say a person isn't missing officially for forty-eight hours. They told me to come back tomorrow or the next day."

"Well, why don't you, Mr. —— ?"

"Cadet Robbins, sir. John Charles Robbins. You see, I can't come back then. I have to get back to the Academy with the rest of the Glee Club on the last train tonight, or I'll get demerits enough to keep me from getting my second-lieutenant's bar at graduation this June. And I'm scared, sir — I'm scared pink. Because if something hadn't happened to her she'd have met that train last night!"

Miss Hildegarde Withers suddenly pricked up her ears.

"The girl-friend's name is Bianca Riley, perhaps?"

He nodded. "And she didn't come to her apartment at all last night, because I 'phoned every hour." Then he stopped. "How did you know, ma'am?"

"I didn't," Miss Withers said shortly. "But I have an excellent imagination. Coming, Oscar? This is serious. Didn't you catch the name? It's Bianca Riley!"

They went speeding northward in a squad car. The car stopped momentarily at 25 Barrow Street, where it developed that Bianca's door was locked. There was a card sticking out of the mail box, bearing the message, "Sorry Johnny 'phone you later oceans love, Bee."

The note gave him no joy, for it was written on the back of an engraved card bearing the name "Louis Hamish, buyer, antiques and objets d'art, 241 East 34th Street."

"She wrote she had a job she was crazy about," the young man said, glowering. "*Objets d'art* my foot!"

"That address is obviously his office," Miss Withers counseled as they got back into the squad car. They turned eastward from the Village, cut to Lexington and rolled north into a region of art shops, print framers, and second-hand bookstores. There was a brass plate outside the doorway of a residence on the corner — "Louis Hamish" nestling among other plates.

"One moment," cried Miss Withers. "I mustn't forget my props."

She was back in a moment, carrying a brown-paper package. Then they

went up the stairs, down the hall to a door with another brass plate. There was no answer to Piper's insistent knock.

"We can kick it down," John Charles Robbins suggested.

And then the door of the studio was suddenly flung open in their faces, closed again as the figure of a pretty, slick-haired girl emerged to face them.

"Johnny!" she cried happily. "But you shouldn't have come here — only I am glad to see you!" She started as if to kiss or be kissed, but Johnny Robbins wasn't having any.

"Tell me one thing, just one," Johnny blurted. "Have you been here all night?" His tone was brittle.

Bianca's cheeks flamed. "Yes, of course. I tried to 'phone the hotel I thought you'd be at. I left a note at home."

But Cadet Robbins wasn't listening. Saying some things in deep bitterness of spirit, the Army turned on its heel and made a dignified retreat.

Bianca started to re-enter the studio.

"Come, Oscar," said Miss Withers, and they pushed inside after the girl. Then they stopped.

They were in a big, square room, almost totally unfurnished. From a big skylight in the ceiling light poured down on an enormous easel, which held, securely fastened to it, a small picture of a bewhiskered young man in a blue hat.

Before that easel, on a high stool, perched a little old man in a big apron, wearing a jeweler's eye-piece. He held razor blades, a tiny sponge, a handful of brushes and a bottle.

At one side, stretched out in a camp chair and sipping a cup of coffee, was a drowsy man with the long-beaked face of an eagle. He looked up at the newcomers without interest. "Nice to see you, Inspector. But we're busy right now — and I've told you everything I know about last night."

"Yeah?" said the Inspector, with definite belligerence.

Hamish snapped his fingers. "All right, Etienne. Come back in half an hour when we can concentrate."

Hamish took his place on the stool. "Go on, I'm listening."

Miss Withers whispered swiftly to the Inspector. "Yes — well, Mr. Hamish, I'd like to know just how long it has been since you paid a visit to the home of the late Dr. Brotherly?"

The man dabbed lovingly with the sponge. "The answer is easy," he said.

"Never."

Again the Inspector allowed himself to be prompted. "What you say sort of clinches things, Hamish. The one who killed Brotherly knew him well enough to know that he bought a green Buddha some weeks ago, but not well enough to know that Brotherly had fifty of the things at home!"

"Go on," Hamish said wearily. "I have an appointment, but it can wait."

"You see," Piper continued, "this Dr. Brotherly had stumbled across what he thought might be a valuable painting on display in the auction rooms. He was all set to pawn his wife's pearls so he'd have funds enough to outbid everybody else. But first he wanted to check up on his guess. It was a clever idea, too."

"Yes, wasn't it?" Miss Withers put in. She approached the easel admiringly.

"Notice, Oscar, how the artist smoothed the lovely cobalt blue of the velvet cap, using his thumb as most artists do.

"Thumbprints in pigment, imagine! And Dr. Brotherly got permission from the Metropolitan to photograph prints on a genuine Holbein, and on Monday afternoon brought the enlarged print to the auction galleries to compare. Only someone found him, interrupted his work. And the poor man had barely time to thrust the photo inside his shirt!"

Louis Hamish went quietly on restoring the painting.

"Yeah," Piper put in. "Somebody realized that Brotherly was wise and managed to strangle him with a silk scarf, stick the body afterward into the nearest large piece of furniture. That's the story, Hamish."

"Ingenious, yes," Hamish admitted. "But you don't think all this applies to me?"

"You bought this painting, didn't you? You were going to buy the wardrobe, and sneak the body out . . ."

"Please don't shout, Inspector. Understand that I'm not a collector, I'm a buyer. I act as agent for museums, galleries and private collectors."

"Well, who hired you to buy last night?"

Hamish looked at his watch.

"The real owner of the Holbein — if it is one — is on his way down here now, with the intention of taking it on the next plane for Chicago. You will, both of you, be somewhat surprised when you see who it is, but you'll realize that it would be impossible for this person to have bid for it."

There was a knock on the door, a voice called "Louis!"

"Ladies and gentlemen, the murderer of Dr. Brotherly," said Hamish

softly. He crossed the floor, swung open the door. A man burst excitedly in, leaving it ajar behind him. It was Paul Varden, auctioneer of the Sutton Galleries.

"Well, Louis! There's the devil to pay!" His voice trailed away as he saw the others, and his face blanched into a guilty mask.

"Talk, and talk fast!" Piper barked. "Does that picture on the easel belong to you? Did you hire Hamish to bid it in for you?"

"Why, this — this —" he fumbled. "Who says so?"

"Did you make a telephone call to the Brotherly home, and send a fake telegram, all calculated to make the family think him alive and hiding from some mysterious Yellow Peril?"

"I don't know what this is all about, but I — I —"

Hamish spoke. "I had to tell them, Paul, old chap. I'm not going to jail to save you. I just admitted you were coming to get your picture."

Not until then did the fog-horn voice of Mr. Paul Varden return full blast. He called upon everybody to witness that he had come simply to warn Hamish about — well, about the fuss the police were making over his having smuggled something out of the auction room windows last night.

Louis Hamish was back at the easel, thoughtfully continuing with the restoration job as if he had no interest in anything else. "Stop looking at me!" Varden howled at the Inspector. "I never killed anybody! You've got to believe me — try the lie-detector, try anything."

"I'll try frisking you," Piper said. A moment later he took a small package from the auctioneer's coat, a package containing opalescent globules.

"Mrs. Brotherly's pearls!" breathed Miss Hildegarde Withers. Piper nodded. "Well, Mr. Paul Varden —" He took out handcuffs, snapped them on the wrists of the cringing auctioneer. "You're taking a ride."

"Yes, of course," came an interrupting voice. "But not quite yet, Oscar. Haven't you forgotten something?"

They all stared at Miss Withers. Piper glared at her.

She pointed to the brown-paper package. "I mean the shoes we found in the apartment up at the Hotel Elleston, remember?"

Hamish still leaned over the painting, but his hand stopped in midair.

"You see," Miss Withers continued conversationally, "Brotherly had to use a magnifying glass in his comparison of the photograph with the prints in the pigment of that picture. The glass was broken in his struggle with the murderer, ground underfoot. Police found some fragments in the dead

man's rubber heels, found others on the showroom floor. Enough to make a complete lens, except for one missing piece. Pearls may be planted in a man's overcoat pocket, but you can't fake the evidence of glass splinters. So if these bits in your rubber heels should happen to match . . ."

She didn't need to go on. Hamish's eagle-face was sleepy no longer. He turned on the stool, and there was a gun in his hand.

"I was afraid that I didn't make the story stick," he admitted. "But it was worth trying. Don't move, Inspector. I'm a fair shot." He took the picture from the easel, tucked it under his arm.

"Just sit tight," he said evenly. "I only want to exit. Want to come, Bianca?"

She looked at him as she might have at a lizard. "I thought you were innocent!" she cried.

He shrugged. "Sorry to disillusion you." Hamish stopped.

"Dear me, but this is a situation," Hamish paused to say. "I need at least ten minutes, and somehow I don't think you'll be sporting enough to give me a head start. Perhaps I ought to shoot one of you, so you'll be busy calling ambulances?"

"You can't get by with this, Hamish!" Piper exploded.

"Yes? And why?"

"Ask the man who stands in the doorway behind you!"

Louis Hamish didn't bat an eye, the gun kept steady. "An old trick, quite unworthy of you, Inspector." He took another step back . . .

He had stepped into the arms of a tall young man in uniform, who held him neatly while the inspector swung a cruelly efficient fist to the pit of his stomach. And then it was over; handcuffs changed hands.

"I had to come back, Bee," Johnny Robbins was saying, "to tell you I was sorry for saying . . ." She seemed to be sorry, too, and glad.

"What I want to know is," Piper demanded of the schoolteacher, "where you got those shoes! Without them we'd be nowhere."

"Exactly, Oscar." Miss Withers picked up the painting from the floor, dusted it off, and replaced it on the easel. "But I have a confession to make. The shoes aren't Hamish's and they haven't any glass splinters in them. I bought them at the shoe shop on the corner, but they served just as well."

The expression on the face of Mr. Louis Hamish, as the schoolteacher said later, was worth the whole trouble of the case. It was really too bad that Bianca Riley and her soldier weren't noticing anything at the moment.

Here is a peculiarly timely story — an exciting murder mystery set against the Sino-Japanese War. All about — you'll be glad to learn — a Japanese corpse. Published here for the first time anywhere.

DILEMMA AT SHANGHAI

by VINCENT STARRETT

THE EXPLOSION of shells continued at intervals throughout the night. First a whine, then a shriek, and then — somewhere in the distance — a reverberating roar. The Japanese cruiser off the far end of the Bund was firing across the settlement into the shambles of Chapei. There was a mathematical rhythm about the performance that was almost soothing, after one had accustomed oneself to the situation, and Macdonald slumbered peacefully into the early hours of the morning. Then the racket became annoying. He groaned, turned over in bed, and at length sat up, reaching sleepily for the discarded coverlet.

Crash-bang! screamed the shells in the distance; and again, outside his door, there was what seemed a thunderous echo of the uproar. Close at hand voices were calling loudly.

"What the deuce?" murmured Mr. Macdonald.

After a moment an explanation occurred to him. Somebody was thumping — indeed, banging — upon his door. And after another moment he caught the word that was being repeated excitedly in the long corridor of the hotel. The word was "*Fire!*"

Awake at last, he bounded out of bed and groped wildly for his shoes. Then, hastily tightening the cord of his pajamas, he hurried to the door, snapped back the bolt, and dashed out into the corridor.

A faint odor of smoke was evident, and somewhere beyond the turn of the passage the excitement still lingered. Whatever Paul Revere had awakened him was still probably upon his rounds. "One if by land and two if by sea," murmured Mr. Macdonald, with mild anxiety. There appeared, however, to be no immediate danger. Here and there along the corridor, doors were being opened and tousled heads were popping forth. The electric lights burned dimly.

He turned back into his bedchamber, snatched a bathrobe from the foot of his bed, and returned to the corridor. It was fairly certain that the fire was concentrated somewhere beyond the well of the stairway. Possibly it was in the other wing of the hotel. . . . He hesitated, then pushed forward in search of it. As he strode, he reflected bitterly and profanely on the situation that had made this rude awakening possible.

"The blasted fools!" said Macdonald, thinking of the warlike little brown men sweating behind the guns of the Japanese cruiser. For it was obvious, he thought, what had happened. A shell had fallen short of its objective and had smacked the hotel. The thing was happening constantly in all parts of the settlement.

An agitated official of the hostelry, half-clad and apologetic, undeceived him. It was not a shell that had fired the hotel. It was impossible to say what had caused the blaze.

"I am so sorry," said the young Chinese; "but there is no more danger, I think. The fire is not a large one. It was found in an old closet — where the boys keep their brooms and things like that. It is not serious. I do not know who has made all this disturbance. Who was it that waked you, please?"

"Somebody with a loud voice," said Macdonald, annoyed. He stifled a yawn. A number of other guests were now clustering around the embarrassed official. "He hammered on my door and shouted 'Fire!' "

"I am very sorry," repeated the young Chinese. "I am afraid that somebody has, as you call it, lost his head. It is, I think, quite safe to return to your rooms. I am very sorry!"

The thin odor of smoke had perceptibly diminished. The young Chinese continued to abase himself. The guests muttered and drew their garments more closely around their shoulders. In the distance the little brown men were continuing their deadly calisthenics. *Crash-bang!* cried the shells, falling into looted Chapei, and the little hotel seemed to vibrate with the explosions.

Mr. Macdonald stifled another yawn. "Good-night," he said, with ironic good-humor. "Don't hesitate to call me, in case of fire."

He returned to his room, his bathrobe flapping around his ankles, and paused in the doorway. A little voice inside him was trying to tell him something.

The door, which he had just opened, had not been closed when he left it; the light above his dresser, now burning brightly, had not been snapped on.

He had left the room in darkness and in haste.

Another matter engaged his attention. One of the drawers of his dresser was standing half open. He crossed the room and looked inside, then opened other drawers. He glanced quickly at his bags, standing on a low rack at the foot of the bed, and after a moment knelt down before them. The buckles of the straps were loosely fastened, and when he opened the bags he saw what he now expected to see.

There was no doubt whatever of what had happened during his brief absence. His room had been thoroughly inspected; every drawer, every bag, had been deftly searched and put to rights again. The evidences were small but sufficient.

That meant, of course, that his garments also had been searched. His billfold he carried in the jacket of his pajamas, which he had on; but there was some loose change in the pockets of his trousers, which hung across a chair. It was still there, however — all of it, as far as he was able to judge. His wallet, with all his papers in perfect order, was still in the jacket of his linen suit that hung on a chair-back. On the stand, beside his portable typewriter, was the long descriptive dispatch upon which he had been working before turning in. It seemed silly to believe that anybody could be interested in *that*. It would be examined by the censors, anyway.

His other garments were in the closet; but there could be nothing in the pockets, surely, that anybody would care to steal. Or could there?

He crossed the room with swift strides and jerked open the closet door — then leaped away in sudden panic.

Something inside had moved. Something that had been braced inadequately against a corner of the door-frame. It moved again — slipped — slid — slithered — and fell with a crash to the floor, half inside and half out.

"*Good Lord!*" said Mr. Macdonald, almost reverently.

It was the body of a man in the garments of the Chinese people; but the face was Japanese. There could be no question of nationality. . . . The thing sprawled awkwardly across the doorsill, face upward.

For a long moment the correspondent stared, mute, at the spectacle. His heart was beating rapidly. He was quite frankly frightened. A series of questions ran rabbitlike through his mind; but they did not get beyond the first incredulous words of interrogation. . . . *What . . . ? Who . . . ? Why . . . ?*

Then his legs functioned, and again he was in the corridor, racing for the

stairhead. He plunged headlong down the curving steps and brought up, panting, at the night desk, where sat the young official, looking weary and unhappy.

Mr. Macdonald babbled out his tale.

"A dead man?" echoed the Chinese. He was incredulous. "A Japanese? But this is very serious, Mr. Macdonald!" He hesitated, looking dubious. "You are quite sure that . . . ?"

"That any of it happened? Oh, yes, I'm sure! Go up yourself. The body's there to prove it."

The Chinese wrung his long fingers. "But this is really very serious," he repeated nervously. "I think — I think we must get a policeman."

The correspondent thought so, too. Together they advanced into the deserted lobby and passed through the front door to the doorstep. The booming guns were sounding ominously close. Over Chapei's sky there was a red glare. Beyond the doorsill, like guardians of a temple, stood two men in uniform — half policemen and half soldiers — with bayonets fixed. The young manager poured out the history of his trouble in passionate Chinese. His vowels crackled like exploding fire-crackers. The policemen listened with impassive faces, glancing occasionally at the correspondent. The three men spoke among themselves.

After a time the procession reversed itself and strode back across the lobby. In the corridor that led to the death chamber the men trod softly and spoke in whispers.

"*Ah!*" said the correspondent suddenly.

"What is it?" The young manager was very nervous.

"That door again! I'm sure I left it open when I ran out. Now it's closed!"

The manager clucked softly; his eyes were frightened. "Perhaps you have forgotten," he suggested, and spoke again in his own language to the policemen, the foremost of whom shoved forward and thrust himself against the door.

It opened without difficulty. Inside, the light above the dresser was still burning. Beyond the edge of the door was visible a motionless human leg, clad in blue coolie cloth.

"At any rate," said Macdonald, "you see that I was telling the truth."

He followed the policemen into the chamber and stood behind them as they knelt beside the body. The young manager brought up the rear.

"This is terrible," said the manager, in his precise English idiom. "Quite

terrible, my dear sir! But — *what is this?*" He bent suddenly above the body. "You told me this man was Japanese."

"He's Japanese, all right," grunted the correspondent. "You ought to know that better than I. He's wearing Chinese clothing; but he's —"

He interrupted himself and, in his turn, knelt quickly beside the body. For an instant there was silence. Then the American's breath sucked inward, with a whistling sound, as he rose.

"That's not the body!" he said. His eyes were popping. "That's — it's another corpse! I'll swear I'm not mistaken. It's lying right where the other one was — but that's not the fellow who fell out of the closet!" He passed a hand across his eyes. "Am I going crazy?" murmured Mr. Macdonald.

The manager and the two policemen looked at him with pity and amusement.

II

"It's wild, isn't it, dear?" said Anne Garrick.

"Insane," agreed Macdonald. "But I saw the other body as plainly as I see you now. Oh, it was there, all right! The only question is: *why* was it there? And what happened to it? And why was the hall boy killed and put into my — *Oh, blast!*" said Mr. Macdonald.

They sat at luncheon on the top floor of the great Occidental Hotel, beside a window that looked out upon a segment of the Whangpoo, in which lay long gray battle cruisers sleeping in the sun. The incredible war was for the moment silent, but in the distance, over Nantao and Chapei, rose the gray vapor of destruction; it lay in dusty wreaths and question-marks along the sky.

Mr. Macdonald tried again. "I can imagine some half-witted Japanese agent investigating my room; that's easy. They prowl in everybody's room, just to see what they can find. It happened every day when I was in Japan. But why should he be *murdered* in my room? If he *was* murdered. I don't know how he died, of course. I was too excited to examine the body. But however he died — *hang it!* — why should his body be stashed in my closet? Was he the beggar who was looking over my things? There's nothing to prove it. Was he there — dead — in the closet, when I went to bed? I didn't look inside. Now there," mused Mr. Macdonald, "is a cheerful thought! It hadn't occurred to me before. He wasn't there yesterday, anyway. As for the *replacement*. . . ."

"The reason for the replacement, darling, is obvious enough," smiled Anne Garrick. "Whoever did it thought you wouldn't know the difference. You are now supposed to think you must have been mistaken. That there was no Japanese in your room at any time, and that the whole episode was Chinese and probably a simple case of burglary."

"I suppose so," growled the correspondent. "That's one I got by myself. In which case, who am I supposed to think killed the Chinese? They must think me an awful fool!"

"How was the Chinese killed? I suppose you noticed that."

"Knifed — in the back."

"Well, *he* was murdered, anyway," commented Miss Garrick brightly. "That's one fact to the good. You're not carrying any important secrets on your person, I hope. If so, the next attack will be on *you* — yourself — personal! No stolen treaties or submarine plans or anything like that?"

The correspondent grinned. "I also read E. Phillips Oppenheim."

Out of a corner of his eye he noted a tall man in uniform making his way across the crowded restaurant toward their table. He twisted in his chair and stood up. The newcomer came up rapidly. He was a giant of a man, over six feet in height, in the uniform of an American officer of marines.

"Hello, Mac," he greeted, shaking hands. "I saw you come in a little while ago, and tried to catch your eye." He bowed a trifle humorously to Anne Garrick, whom he did not know. "Have you heard the news?" he finished in a lower key.

"Captain Tyler, Miss Garrick," muttered Macdonald hurriedly. "No, I haven't! What's happened that I ought to know?"

The captain dragged up a chair and sat down. He leaned across the table confidentially. "I could be court-martialed for telling you, I suppose," he laughed; "but it will be all over town before long, anyway. Besides, it's England's funeral, not ours. O'Donnell has been murdered."

"O'Donnell? Who the dickens is — *Oh!*"

"That's the man," agreed the captain; "and he's been murdered. He's England's Lawrence-of-Arabia in these parts, Miss Garrick, except that his name is O'Donnell and his field is China and Japan."

"Holy Moses!" said Macdonald. "And I have a deadline in New York in —" He consulted his watch and made an abstruse mathematical calculation. "In less than an hour," he finished. "What else do you know, Tyler? I mean, who —?"

"It happened last night sometime," said the captain, "in his room at the old Soochow Hotel."

The correspondent almost yelled, and Anne Garrick squealed her astonishment.

"That's *my* hotel," cried Macdonald. "I didn't know he was there. Good Lord, Anne, do you realize —?" He broke off, staring.

"So it is," said the captain. "I'd forgotten that. You didn't bump him off, yourself, I suppose? But, seriously, that's where it happened. The big fellows always frequent these little native places, you know; probably for the same reason *you* do — they want privacy. But I'm surprised you didn't hear some rumor of it around the hotel. Wasn't there any excitement?"

The correspondent was thinking desperately. "There was a fire there — last night — and a Japanese was killed — and then a Chinese." He spoke slowly, piecing the thing together, as it might have happened. "Now why the deuce," he asked, " was *I* involved in this?"

"You weren't," said Anne Garrick. "It's the names — don't you see? Macdonald and O'Donnell! They got them mixed. They got into your room first, and later discovered their mistake. It's the sort of thing a Japanese *would* do."

Macdonald nodded. "You're probably right," he agreed.

"Do you mind telling me what you are talking about?" asked the captain; and then he listened with amazement to the correspondent's story.

"It's a wonder you weren't murdered," said Anne Garrick warmly.

The captain nodded. "Miss Garrick is right," he said. "You'll never be closer to it than you were last night — unless it actually happens," he added thoughtfully. "You see the situation, don't you? Your testimony makes it clear that Japan was responsible. That dead Jap in your closet — however he was killed — betrays the plot. The removal of the body and the substitution of another was an effort to pull the wool over your eyes."

Macdonald got hurriedly to his feet. "Just the same," he said, "I've got a story to get off, if it's the last thing I do in China." His eyes were shining. "*What* a story!" he murmured; and was suddenly self-conscious. "Look here, Tyler, you'll stay with Anne won't you, until I get back?"

"Not me," said the captain, promptly and ungrammatically. "I'm going with you to the cable office. Nobody's going to trouble Miss Garrick, and there's a lot of trouble lying in wait for *you*. Of course, you didn't hear this story from me!"

"Of course not," agreed the correspondent. He looked dubiously at Anne Garrick. "Well, all right! I've simply got to go, Anne. You can see that, can't you?" Her eyes smiled, and Macdonald suddenly chuckled. "You've got that little pistol I gave you, if you don't like the way somebody looks at you!"

She laughed and nodded. It was quite a joke between them, that little pistol. There was some question whether Anne would know which end to use in an emergency. Neither she nor young Mr. Macdonald, in point of fact, had ever fired a weapon in their lives.

"I'll wait right here," she promised. "I won't go any farther than the lounge." She sipped her tea and smiled again. "Captain Tyler is right, Mac. Nobody is going to trouble *me*."

In this, however, neither the captain nor Miss Garrick was correct.

She watched them thread their way across the restaurant and vanish near the elevators, then returned to her tea and salad. After a time she paid the bill that the correspondent had forgotten and strolled into the lounge, where a tableful of magazines and newspapers — only a month old — awaited her pleasure. She ignored them, however, and dropped into a big chair beside the window, to smoke a cigarette. She was faintly worried about Mac, relatively a newcomer to Shanghai, who seemed to think his American citizenship a rabbit's foot guaranteed to protect him against anything. She knew better than to believe any such nonsense. Macdonald had been in Shanghai barely a year and a half. From the dizzy heights of her own three years' residence in the port, as the daughter of a minor oil company official, she smiled down at the correspondent a little patronizingly. Her knowledge of the language, too — slim as it was — gave her somewhat the upper hand of the rather cocky newspaperman whom she had determined to marry.

The curtains moved again. A man in uniform entered the lounge, glancing idly about him. He was short and plump and rather like a robin, she thought. A Japanese robin. At sight of her his eyes lighted with recognition. He came forward, smiling.

"How happy!" cried the robin. "I am so pleased! It is the so-beautiful Miss Garrick, is it not?"

This was condescension with a vengeance! At any rate, they had not sent a stupid boy to market. Nor had any grass sprouted beneath the military

shoes of the Japanese intelligence, reflected Anne Garrick, half humorously.

"I am Major Kanaya," added the paragon, with simple majesty. "But perhaps you do not remember me?"

Miss Garrick was both amused and alarmed.

"But of course, Major Kanaya," she answered, with a little smile. "We met once at an Embassy tea, I think."

"And *danced*," cried Major Kanaya rapturously. "Do not forget that, Miss Garrick, please! For me, it is one of my memories."

"It is good of you to remember," said Anne Garrick. "That was, of course, before these unhappy days in which we are now living."

"As you say, that was two years ago." The major sighed. "Alas, that such times have come to us! I am so sorry about it all. Would you be so good, perhaps, as to care for a cup of tea?"

"Thank you, but I have just had my cup of tea. I am . . . waiting for a friend." As well to learn at once, she thought, what it was this sleuth was after. Information, she supposed. She had been seen in conversation with Macdonald, and of course they would want to know how much the correspondent had told her.

"A friend — ah, yes," sighed the major. His little mustache quivered, his full lips parted in a smile intended to be roguish, his gold teeth gleamed. "If, by chance, it is the handsome young reporter, Macdonald, for whom you wait, I must admit that just now I saw him leaving the hotel. These young newspaper men!" he shrugged. "They are not — how do you say it? — responsible, I think. They get a story, as they call it, and away they hurry to a cable office, forgetting everything but their strange duty to a million readers whom they have never seen! Ah, well, he is a nice boy," said Major Kanaya generously, "a very charming young man. I know him well. We are excellent friends, Macdonald and I."

He was not too subtle, she reflected. And, after all, why should he be? They both knew what it was the major wanted. Each knew, if he knew anything at all, precisely what the situation was.

Miss Garrick also shrugged. "He left in something of a hurry," she volunteered, with an appearance of frankness. "I wondered what it was about. Has something important happened, to make him leave his luncheon?"

The major shrugged again. His impeccable shoulders rose and fell heavily. "Who can say? The port is always filled with rumors. Most of them untrue! But what does that matter to our gay young correspondent? He did not

mention, then, the matter that was upon his mind?"

Well, there it was — the direct question! Mac would want her to lie, of course; and this popinjay would probably expect it. Wherefore, why not lie? No point in stalling — in talking about Tyler and a mysterious message. She lied without a trace of hesitation.

"Not a word," said Anne, and smiled into her inquisitor's eyes. "Perhaps he didn't trust me. Do you think that's it?"

The major's answering smile acknowledged his defeat.

"Impossible!" he cried. "But I am so sorry we cannot have a cup of tea together. Perhaps another time! And now I must not bother you any more, I think. Good-bye, my dear Miss Garrick. If I can be of service to you, I shall be so happy."

He would have cut her throat as readily as he touched her hand, she reflected, and shuddered a little when he was gone. Others, she supposed, already had gone after Mac and the captain. Had she done her friends a disservice by not holding the major in conversation? But her own duty, just now, was obviously to stay where she was and wait. No doubt there would be a procession of polite young officers visiting the lounge. Perhaps some of them would not even be polite.

An idea seized her. She would call her home, then take a room at the hotel. She would leave word at the desk where she was to be found when Mac came back. It was a capital idea, and it pleased her. If anything happened to keep Mac from her, she would be more likely to get his call in her room than if a page went searching her.

She left word with the restaurant cashier of her intention and, descending to the crowded lobby, signed the register in her boldest hand.

"I am expecting a call at any minute," she told the clerk. "Please see that it is put through at once."

From her own room, then, on the fifth floor of the hostelry, she called the cable office; but Macdonald and the captain had not yet arrived.

"Have Mr. Macdonald call me, please, when he comes in," she requested, and turned to open her door, on which a soft knock had fallen while she was speaking.

A squat and slovenly young man in blue coolie cloth entered casually, carrying a long mop and a pail.

"Clean windows, Missy," he explained, and began at once upon his task, running the water noisily in the bathroom while he filled his pail.

"But I don't *want* the windows cleaned," cried Anne, annoyed. "This sudden efficiency is ridiculous. I want to lie down and go to sleep."

"No clean windows?" The young man was incredulous. "No sweep floor, take off bed cover?" Such inattention to the details of comfort and cleanliness, his manner indicated, was beyond him.

"If the floor needs sweeping it should have been done earlier," said Anne, exasperated. She looked at him keenly. Was it possible the man was not Chinese at all, but Japanese? Was her encounter with the major making her too suspicious? Yet surely she had seen this face before.

"Bring ice-water?" asked the young man stolidly, eager to please.

"No, go ahead and wash the windows, if that's what you came in for. Get it over quickly."

Half-reclining on the bed, a cigarette between her lips, she watched him as he rapidly performed his task. With mounting indignation she realized the espionage that was being practiced upon her. Mac's call was what they wanted now, no doubt; or any calls that she would make herself. When he had finished she spoke angrily.

"Now do them again, you lazy rascal," she commanded, in Chinese. "And do a better job, this time! Yes, every one of them. Go over them again!"

The windows were done over, this time with greater care.

"Now sweep the rug," said Anne, "and wipe the floor around its edges. Don't miss an inch!"

The young man meekly obeyed. She studied the planes of his face, the angle of his jaw, as on hands and knees he crept around the room.

"That's better," she observed when he had finished. She fumbled in her handbag. "Here is ten cents for you, Captain Takahashi," she added, smiling scornfully. "The last time we met, I think, was at an Embassy reception, was it not?"

The dustcloth fell from the young man's hand and fluttered to the rug. He turned slowly and looked into her eyes.

"And when you leave the room, close the door quietly behind you," said Anne Garrick.

For the first time he smiled. The thick lips opened, disclosing the usual array of gold fillings among bold white teeth.

"But I am not leaving the room, Miss Garrick," said the captain softly.

He moved slowly toward her across the soundless rug.

"Keep back," said Anne. "Get away from me, you — you — *monkey!*"

Once more she cried "Get back!" and tried to scream; and after that there was no time for either speech or screaming. . . .

Flung backward across the low bed, with rough hands pressing against her mouth, for an instant she relaxed, then wriggled free and rolled swiftly to the floor, dragging the light coverlet with her. Her bag, which had been in her hand, fell with her to the floor and spilled its contents on the rug. . . .

The pistol!

It was underneath her hand. What was it Mac had said about a safety catch?

Her fingers closed around the butt, and immediately something rough and hard was just below her thumb. She pushed it downward. . . .

"Keep back!" she whispered, staring up at him from the floor.

Her eyes were wide with horror; but the hand that held the little weapon did not shake.

The Japanese laughed and sprang.

She did not hear the sound of the explosion. She only knew that she had squeezed the trigger and that the body that had fallen heavily upon her was now a dead weight on her own. There was no sound or movement in the corridors. There was no sound or movement from the captain — only the intolerable burden of his weight across her face and breast.

After a time she struggled free and staggered to her feet. Her telephone was ringing. *Mac!*

"Yes," she whispered, in answer to his question. "Yes — I'm here! *Come quick!*"

III

They looked down upon the body of the captain, in his Chinese garments — the girl in horror, the marine officer with a certain satisfaction, Macdonald in complete bewilderment. The correspondent's eyes were popping. Over Nantao the uproar of exploding shells had begun again. They exploded with a mathematical precision that made it possible to predict the moment of the next. *Crash-bang!* Like that. *Crash-bang!*

"Takahashi?" repeated Macdonald. He raised his voice. "This is a Captain Takahashi?"

"Oh, yes," she told him, shuddering. "There isn't any doubt of it. I've met him any number of times. As soon as I remembered, I knew exactly who he was."

"And I know, too," said Macdonald. "He's the fellow who fell out of my closet — *dead* — at three o'clock this morning!"

"*What?*" cried the marine officer, like a character in the pictures. After a moment he dropped a hand on his friend's arm. "Take it easy, boy," said the captain kindly. "This has been a bit of a shock for you, I realize. After all —"

Macdonald was annoyed. "I'm not crazy, Tyler," he insisted. "I've just tumbled to what happened. I tell you I *recognize* this man. He's the other dead man! But he wasn't dead then, of course. He was shamming. Don't you see? He'd been looking through my things and he heard me coming. The fire was *his* job, too. Well, he slipped into the closet and closed the door, hoping I'd go away. But I didn't. When I opened the door on him, he took a chance and crashed! He knew what I'd do — and hanged if I didn't do it. I left him there and dashed out of the room for help. As soon as my back was turned, he hopped to his feet and —"

"And went to the *right* room and murdered Mr. O'Donnell," said Anne Garrick, in sudden excitement. "He'd already found out his mistake."

She was beginning to feel a little better; but Macdonald's arm around her shoulders was still necessary. It wasn't pleasant to have killed even a murderer like Takahashi.

The captain nodded. "You're probably right," he admitted. "Very clever of Takahashi, too! But I'm glad he's dead at last." A moment later he frowned. "It's a bit of a mess, though; or hadn't that occurred to you? What are we going to do with this body?"

They looked at one another for several moments. It was an embarrassing dilemma.

"What his intentions were with Miss Garrick, we shall never know," continued the captain. "Disgrace? Kidnaping? Perhaps even murder! And *why?* To stop you, my friend, in your headlong career. It's just as well you made no accusations in that dispatch of yours. All we really know is that O'Donnell's dead — that somebody killed him. That ought to be enough of a 'beat,' for the time being. Now Takahashi's dead, and —" The captain shrugged. "*We* know the truth, of course; but we're not in a position to prove it."

There was another silence.

"If it were *my* room," said Macdonald, at last, "I'd just pack him in the closet and leave him there. That's where he was the last time I saw him, after

all. I'd discover him accidentally and tell the management."

"That's what we have to do in this room," said the captain. "It's all we *can* do. Miss Garrick took the room less than an hour ago. Well, a few minutes ago — just before you called — she happened to look into her closet, and immediately fainted. When she came around, the telephone was ringing. She told you what she had found, and you hurried to the scene. What's wrong with that? Who's going to contradict it, in view of all that's happened? The Japanese know what this man was up to; but they're not going to admit it. I think they're going to keep their faces shut. Let the British discover who murdered O'Donnell — I'll drop them a hint, if you like! But *you* haven't accused anybody. No, I think our little friends will simply call it a draw — or perhaps one up for Allan Macdonald. But you'll have to watch your step, boy, in the future. The Japs won't like you."

"They don't like me, anyway," said Macdonald.

The captain stooped and plucked the pistol from the rug. "I'll just take this with me when I go," he said. "There's no blood to speak of. Now you and Anne look out of the window for a minute, will you, while I put this fellow in the closet?"

They turned their backs until the ghastly business was accomplished. A chuckle sounded behind them.

"Well, well," said Captain Tyler briskly, closing the closet door, "what an extraordinary story, Mac! A dead Jap in your closet, you say? And as soon as your back was turned the body vanished and another took its place? And then the first body was discovered in another closet in a different hotel? Darned if I understand it — but it would make good reading, I imagine."

The correspondent grinned and tightened his arm around Anne Garrick's shoulders.

"I wouldn't dare to print it in a newspaper," he confessed. "But I might write it as fiction, and pretend I made it up. Say, there's an idea. By George, I think I *will!*"

The great humorist in a serious moment. A private detective, a little Southern town, home-spun characters, and a strange crime.

CABBAGES AND KINGS

by IRVIN S. COBB

THE WIND came up with the sun, so for an hour or so at our point we had fairly good shooting, mainly on mallard and teal. But before eight o'clock the wind fell away and soon then died on us and the flight was over. Barring when an occasional single buzzed across the stool, we got no chance to warm our gun-barrels.

All at once, from behind us there was a silken whistling of stout swift wings, and a big bull-mallard whizzed by, banking on an acute angle. It seemed he must have been making a late breakfast in the rice-stubble, otherwise there was no earthly excuse for him to be curving out of that quarter at this time of the day and in such a rush. Thorne grabbed up his automatic and made a swell snap-shot, and that large passer-by came slanting down, kerflop, in the edge of the marsh to the right, and made the first and only ripples on the water that we had seen for an hour or more. He righted himself and Thorne poised, ready to give him a finishing load in case he made for the tall rushes. But this fellow wasn't a cripple, he was a real casualty.

Swimming in small circles, he began nodding like a drunken man who automatically agrees with everything you're saying. He nodded faster and faster, then slower and slower, and then in a fine valedictory flutter turned bottomside up, with his broad, bright-yellow feet folding in like two pond-lilies at sundown, and immediately after that was no more. Thorne waded out, going carefully through the soft ooze, and fetched deceased in and dumped him with the rest of our bag at the back of the blind.

"We kind of stole that baby, didn't we?" he said.

"We? You flatter me."

"Anyhow, he's ours." He retamped his pipe. "Say, tell me," he said next, "did I ever tell you about the Doctor Trout murder case?"

"No," I said, "but you're going to, I can see that. Whatever put the

Whatyoumaycallem murder into your mind?"

"Old Mr. Green-head here did — in a way of speaking."

"Was there a dead duck or a load of duck-shot or something else duckish mixed up in the thing, then?"

"No, it wasn't that way at all. Say, did you ever stop to think how one thing reminds you of another thing and that thing of something else and so on until in about a minute you're a million miles away from where you started? And you stop and wonder how the dickens that particular subject came to hop into your mind? But if you'll only work back, you'll see how it's all part of an unbroken chain — one link tied to another and each one suggesting something else that's more or less vaguely related to it. The Walrus in *Alice in Wonderland* wasn't so daffy when he said the time had come to talk about shoes and ships and sealing-wax, and cabbages and kings. I claim he wasn't. Why wouldn't cabbages bring up kings if there was a connection somewhere? Now, you take this fat drake that just got plastered: While he was passing out, out yonder, I said to myself he ought to make a lovely meal for somebody, but wasn't it a pity that guide's wife of ours didn't know how to cook a duck decently but must always fry him good and hard? And that made me think of the way a good French chef can fix up a duck so he'll just naturally get up off the platter and fly down your throat; and I said to myself, wasn't it a pity our country people couldn't handle food the way those French peasants can? And that reminded me of some of the bad cooking I'd run into at company messes and even regimental messes when I was with the A. E. F. over there in France; and that brought up field-kitchens at the front; and that brought up what I saw a shell do once to one of our field-kitchens, and that brought up something that I took, that time, off a dead soldier — or what was left of him; and that brought up the Trout murder case; and there you are, all in about one-twentieth of the time I'm taking now to map out the sequence of it for you."

"All of which would seem to make you an exciting back-number of the *North American Review*," I said. "Well, go on with the tale, because that's where you're heading for. I'm one of those rarely gifted geniuses that can listen with one eye and watch the heavens for stray birds with the other."

"You're darned tooting that's where I'm headed for," he agreed. The board under us creaked as he settled himself back to begin. I may say right here that this friend of mine, Dan Thorne, is of a rare species. He's almost the only one of his sort I've ever met. He's an educated man who delib-

erately chose to be a policeman; not that all policemen are uneducated men, because to claim that would be claiming what's untrue. I've known college graduates — yes, one ex-college professor — who wore brass buttons and pounded beats in thick-soled shoes. But here, understand, was a man who, having no need for the money he might earn at the calling, and belonging to a family whose male members were professional men if they weren't business men or planters, yet elected to join the Memphis police force when he came out of the University of Virginia, after having taken a law course there. He was ordinary patrolman at first, but he didn't stay ordinary patrolman for long. His chief discovered he had natural aptitude along certain trends and took the youngster out of uniform and put plain clothes on him and pretty soon he was making better than a local name for himself as a detective. Before we got into the war he took a leave of absence and entered an officers' training-camp, and when the break came he had his commission and went overseas as a captain in one of the first contingents to get over. His inclinations were for service in the line but with his schooling the Military Intelligence section was plainly indicated for him and, for a wonder, a man especially fitted for a particular job was given that job by those little tin gods on wheels who spent so many congenial hours trying to fit the round peg into the square hole, and then wondered why the gears wouldn't mesh sometimes. After the mess was ended he came home, limping a trifle — a machine-gun bullet bored his knee three days before Armistice — and since then he had been rather at loose ends for regular occupation, with plenty of money to spend, an uncle having died and left him a really handsome estate. He didn't feel like settling down, he said. For the sport of the thing, the love of the game, he sometimes did help out the authorities in his part of the South, when there was a puzzling crime to be unraveled, working under cover, though, as a sort of unpaid volunteer aide. But in the open season on wild fowl he gunned pretty steadily; for to him no call was so strong as the call of the marshes. This was the second fall for the two of us, shooting together down in the Gulf country, and out of his store of experience I already had heard yarns which were worth listening to and, some of them, useful for fabrication into copy. So this morning, during the lull, when he showed signs of getting set to tell a tale, my inner ears twitched, even though I might pretend to be only mildly interested.

He made the board creak again and was off: "That Trout killing, now"; he said, "that was one killing that I managed to untangle and clean up all

by my little self and then just kept my trap closed and let the party that had done the killing get away with it, so that the only credit I got out of it was out of my own conscience. I figure it might not have been exactly ethical for me to do that, that is it wouldn't if I'd still been a regular cop working for wages and bound by an oath. But as a free lance, which I was — well, anyhow, I'll let you say when I'm through whether I did the right thing.

"It happened about a year and a half after I got back from the other side. By then my leg was as good as it's ever going to be. I'd had a couple of operations and a lot of treatment but it was evident the joint would always be stiff. Fussing around with hospitals and specialists had given me occupation for a spell but now I was restless and inclined to drift with the current. The after-effects of war take lots of fellows that way, as you know. I thought for a while of going into the government secret service — they offered me a berth — but I passed that up after going up to Washington and talking it over with the head of the bureau. Then I went on to New York for a while. On the way back home that trip I stopped over in Chattanooga for a day or so with an old classmate of mine who'd been shot and gassed both, during the St. Mihiel drive, and was in bad shape. On my second morning there I was knocking about down-town and ran into a fellow I'd known ever since the old days — Fred Gaither was his name and he came from Baltimore originally. He had been a Burns operative once. Now, so he told me right off, he'd opened up shop as a private detective. He asked me what I was doing and I said I wasn't doing anything in particular and found it rather a tiresome job. As I said that, I saw a kind of light come into his eyes and he asked me if I had ten minutes to spare. I told him yes — ten minutes or ten days or ten months, so far as that went. 'Great,' he said. 'Come along with me then. My office is right upstairs here.'

"So when we got up there he said, 'Dan, I've got something that's right down your street — a murder case with some mighty unusual features to it. I've been working on it myself; had a couple of my best men working on it, too, and we've got nowhere. Now,' he says, 'there's a nice juicy reward posted — five hundred offered by the state and a thousand more that the widow of the man who was killed added on. If you care to tackle it and can run down the guilty party, whoever he is, I'll make any sort of deal about the money end that's agreeable to you, except that I'd like to see this agency get the glory. It's the case of a certain Dr. Adrian Trout, who was assassinated up here in the mountains not far from the Kentucky line, at

Uniondale. Maybe you read something about it?'

"I had — a dispatch in a Washington paper. 'But that was three or four weeks ago,' I said. 'The trail's cold by now.'

" 'No colder than it was from the beginning,' he says. 'This trail was born cold and hasn't warmed up since. I'll be honest with you,' he says; 'this is a tough puzzle, this Trout killing. But I'll stand all expenses and if you come through with it you can have the whole fifteen hundred or, if you want to split on any sort of basis, you just name the terms and I'm agreeable to whatever you say.'

" 'I don't require expenses and I don't need the money,' I said.

" 'Well, I do,' he says. 'I've just started up on my own hook and expenses have been heavy and business is still slow although I've picked up one or two accounts — banks and business houses — that bring in something. But what this concern of mine needs more than anything else to make it a go is a reputation. And if somebody on my staff cleared up this killing after the local people and the imported investigators, including myself, have fallen down, why, the free advertising we'd get here would be worth a lot to me personally. Won't you join in with me, Dan,' he says, 'for old times' sake? Besides,' he says, 'you might get a big kick out of it.'

" 'Well,' I said, 'if you put it that way —'

" 'I do put it that way,' he says. And with that he began hauling records and reports and newspaper clippings and what-not out of a filing cabinet.

"Well, the upshot was that I got steamed up and spent the morning going over the stuff and discussing the different angles of it with Fred Gaither, and the next day I was on my way with him in his car into the mountains northwest of Chattanooga. Where the decent highway ended I left him and he turned back — it had been agreed that I should handle the thing by myself — and I hired a buckboard and rode the last eighteen miles into this little town of Uniondale over one of the worst apologies for a road on God's green earth. You couldn't get in there by rail or anywhere near it by rail. It's a county-seat but it's tucked away there in the knobs, miles from anywhere — a typical mountain town, one of the few that are left just as they were before the automobiles came — and it's populated by typical mountain people. You know the type, being from Kentucky yourself?"

I nodded and at the same time pointed. To our left, one lonesome ring-neck was flipping to and fro over the rushes in the hurried but aimless fashion of the ring-neck tribe. We made ready for him but all of a sudden he re-

membered that this wasn't the place where he'd left his umbrella and quit hunting for it and flickered past, forty yards distant, and vanished downstream like a wind-blown leaf.

Thorne laid his gun back down and went on: "I got there about dark, and put up at the leading hotel. It had to be the leading hotel because it was the only one. You've guessed it — about eight guest-rooms and you carry up your own ice-water and towels — if you can find any towels — and they have pink water-proof soap and they call it the Fifth Avenue or the Grand. They called this one the Grand. I didn't pretend to be a canvasser taking orders for crayon portraits or a timber-cruiser or a solicitor getting subscriptions for some farm magazine — that's old stuff and doesn't get you anywhere, either. I didn't pretend to be anything but what I was, and so the first thing I did after I'd taken a bath in a wash-basin and eaten supper with everything fried except the coffee — and it might have been improved if they'd fried it — was to go out and hunt up the sheriff and the coroner and the county attorney, and lay my cards on the table and tell them frankly who I represented. In a way, I spoke the same language they spoke, and in another way I didn't — we were all of us native Tennesseans but they were mountaineers and I was a lowlander. Anyhow, I told 'em what I was there for and, of course, inside of fifteen minutes the news must have been all over the place.

"Probably I'd better give you a sort of picture of the case, the way it stood when I got there. This murdered man, Dr. Adrian Trout, had been born and raised in the county on a creek with the interesting name of Stubtoe Creek. His people must have been more prosperous than the run of their neighbors because they'd been able to send him off to medical college, and after he'd graduated he came back and opened up for practice among his own folks. If you stirred up the undercurrents of popular opinion it didn't take you very long to find out he'd never been exactly popular, either as a young hillbilly growing up or as a citizen. For one thing, his general disposition was against him — he was inclined to be dictatorial and overbearing and stuck-up over the fact that he'd had an education — and besides, his reputation for running after women wasn't as good as it might be. Then, in '17 he'd served as medical examiner for the local draft-board and that wasn't calculated to make friends for him — up there in the knobs they didn't always look very kindly on the draft. France was an awful long distance off to those people. Even so, it didn't appear that he'd had any real

outspoken enemies. His family never had been mixed up in any of the old feuds; fact was this particular county never had a feud in it. There was no record that he'd ever been in a serious fight or been threatened by anyone. He just wasn't trusted, that was all, and he never had been liked in the community. But, you'd say that not being liked was no reason why anybody should want to bump him off, and wait months or years for the chance to do it, too.

"Well, be that as it may, while the war was still on or about the time it ended, he up and married a well-to-do widow from near Nashville, a woman who was considerably older than he was. He must have been about thirty-five then. And he moved down to the town where she lived and never once came back again until four days before he was killed.

"He came back on account of some legal formalities in connection with the settling up of a little scrap of an estate in which he had an interest. It would seem he did quite a bit of strutting up and down the main street, which was almost the only street worth the name. He was showing off his city-made clothes and his affluence and his importance. Well, on the fourth day, shortly after dinner-time, which would make it about one-thirty o'clock in the afternoon, he went to the county clerk's office, which was in the fore part of the little court-house, to get a copy of a certain transcript. The clerk hadn't quite finished copying it — they kept most of their records in longhand up there — and Trout told him he'd go outside, it being cooler out there than it was inside, and wait until the job was done. He was aiming to leave that same day.

"Well, according to the clerk, it couldn't have been more than two minutes after that when he heard a gun crack somewhere close at hand and heard a thump and a sort of scuffling sound at the front entrance. He dropped what he was doing and ran out. Trout was lying sprawled in the doorway. He'd been shot in front, right through the heart. He was dead by the time the clerk got to him. There was nobody in sight — on a warm day in a little country-town people are not apt to stir about much for an hour or so after midday; you know that without my telling you. The clerk looked up and down and he said that for an appreciable space, before people who'd heard the report began to hop outdoors, the little square and the street in front of it were absolutely deserted. If there was any eyewitness to the killing, nobody ever found him or her.

"Immediately, though, it was easy enough to figure where the shot had

been fired from. It had been fired from somewhere upon a rather steep little hill which rose on the far side of the street and faced the county square. There was a store and a harness-shop directly across from the court-house but the shot couldn't have come from that level. The course of the wound proved that — the shot had slanted downward at rather a steep angle, proving that it must have been fired from well above the opposite house-line. Now, above the shops up on the hill were two buildings and only two — both of them dwellings, one stuck in the side of the hill a few yards above the other, and both reached by footpaths from the street. Otherwise the hill was bare — no trees on it, no thick bushes, no anyplace where a human being could hide. What's more, the clerk stuck to it that he glanced at that hill a moment after he reached Trout's side. In fact, he said he did more than just glance; he said he searched the whole side of it with his eye and saw nothing moving. Measurements showed that if Trout was sitting down on a bench that stood just outside the court-house doorway, the shot might very well have come from the general direction of the lower one of the two hillside houses opposite; from inside of it or from behind it or from under it — it stood on posts a foot and a half off the ground — or even from just over the ridgepole of its roof. On the other hand, if he was standing up, the shot might have come from the approximate direction of the uppermost of the two houses. But nobody could testify whether he was standing or sitting, and that complicated things. No weapon was found in or near either of these two houses, no footprints either, although, the grass being fairly thick in places and the footpaths hard and dry, it would have been difficult to find foot-tracks if they were there. And, so far as the residents of the two houses were concerned — I'll come to them individually in a minute — there wasn't any earthly reason for anybody to suspect that they or any one of them could have had a hand in the killing or any knowledge of it before or after. There wasn't any earthly reason to suspect anybody at all. The most commonly accepted theory was that the assassin must have been lying in ambush under or behind one or the other of the houses and either that he got away unobserved in the first hullabaloo of excitement, or that he stayed concealed right where he was until things had quieted down, and then escaped. But to offset that, the county clerk — and a reasonably alert, intelligent chap he was — said his first scrutiny of the face of the hill had been thorough even though it was a hasty one, and besides, inside of five minutes after Trout dropped searchers led by a deputy sheriff who happened to be

in the back part of the court-house building, were swarming all over the slope. It was exactly as though death had come leaping at the man from the rounded slant of that hill — like a bolt of lightning, like a dart out of the earth, like anything uncanny and unhuman that you want to imagine.

"But wait, that wasn't the freakiest feature of it, not by a long shot it wasn't. They had an autopsy on the body — sort of an autopsy, anyhow. The bullet, passing through the body at that downward slant it took, had stopped just under the skin in the small of the back, almost touching the spinal column. They dug it out and it wasn't a regular bullet at all. It wasn't even lead. It was a roughly circular slug or chunk of some dull hard metal. At first they thought it might be brass. Afterward it turned out to be a bronze composition. It might have been a mutilated button or a pounded-up scrap of a badge or a lodge emblem — something of that nature."

Thorne stopped and tamped a fresh charge into his pipe and borrowed a match from me. There was hardly a breath of air stirring; the blue smoke of his tobacco rose straight up in a solid-looking little spindle. There in the shelter of our ambuscade it was like an August day for warmth and stillness.

"That's a rough sketch of how matters stood when I struck this little town of Uniondale. I slept on it that night and next morning I climbed the knoll and met the members of the two households that lived up there. I'll take the first house first. I'll boil the facts down: First house: three rooms, plank construction, unpainted, fairly new. Owned by one Anderson Padgett, carpenter by trade. He built it himself, odd times. He lives there with his wife and a new baby. Straightforward, hard-working young pair; stand well with their neighbors. Here's Padgett's story to me: He's sitting in the middle room, nursing the baby while his wife, back in the kitchen, is washing up the dinner dishes. He hears a shot, and knows it must have been fired from close by, but can't make up his mind exactly where it came from owing to being indoors and owing also to the echo against the hill. For the moment he isn't deeply concerned; in a country where shooting at a mark is still a favorite outdoor pursuit of the inhabitants, a shot generally doesn't mean much. After a minute or two, though, decides to see what's doing, if anything. Puts the baby on the bed, goes to the front door, and across the way he sees the county clerk alongside a body and sees people coming at a run. His wife confirms his account. Her experience is practically the same as his except that she rather thinks the gun cracked at the back of their house

toward the left, whereas he's inclined to say it might have been slightly below and, if anything, off to the right. Innocence written all over both of them; both formerly acquainted with Trout but no record that either of them ever had any dealings with him or bore him any grudge. That's that. Let's temporarily eliminate Padgett and move on; he's a short horse and soon curried.

"Now then, we're going to climb sixty feet up the slope to the second house. It's an old-time log cabin — what they call a double cabin. You know the style — two rooms, separate cabins, really, set side by side, with one roof to cover 'em both and an open space or 'gallery' — to give it the country name — in between. Two women live here — a sick young woman that's bedfast, and an old crippled woman that's looking after her. The young woman's name is Byers — Martha Byers, according to the data in my hands. She's married but she's shy a husband. His name is Tobe Byers, harmless enough but a pretty tolerable worthless party, by all accounts. They've been married less than two years. She'd always been in poor health but lately when she became a confirmed invalid he just up and ran off and left her and nobody knows his present whereabouts — the trifling, dirty scoundrel! After he abandons her, she gets word to the old crippled woman who's no kin to her but who, it seems, was a sort of foster-mother to her before her marriage, and the old woman leaves her own shack back up in the mountains somewhere and comes down to nurse her and look after her. Other than this old woman there isn't a soul to whom the young woman can turn. One look at her and you can write this poor little thing's ticket. She's got consumption and is almost through. The death-look is on her; her voice is almost gone. And her arm-bones are like pipestems. The old woman is a character. Everybody calls her 'Aunt Lizzie' except the dying girl and she calls her 'Mom'; on Gaither's notes she's down as 'Lizzie Johnson, unmarried, commonly known as Aunt Lizzie.' She's close to seventy, I'd say, but well-preserved for her age. Before she fell off a mule years before and broke her hip, she could do a man's work, so they say, and could handle tools almost like a man. Now she hobbles about on a crutch — an awkward-looking thing, painted a bright red and heavily padded at the arm-crotch and the hand-grip with rags, evidently a home-made crutch. Offhand, my guess is that it's one she made herself. Considering her weight — she's a broad, heavy woman — she gets about on it pretty briskly, though.

"She can do a woman's work, too — that's plain to be seen. That little

shanty is clean as a pin inside and everything in apple pie order. She's absolutely devoted to the sick woman; anybody can see that. She wears a pair of rusty old glasses with thread wrapped around the part that goes over the bridge of the nose, and she still has all her teeth, and she has a broad placid face and she chews tobacco, just like a man, and she talks like a house afire — I never met such a chronic old chatterbox in my life — and altogether she impresses me as a competent, honest, ignorant, not very shrewd old female — loose-tongued but well-meaning. Now, you'd say that here wasn't very promising material to work on, either, when you were looking for a cold-blooded assassin — a dying girl and a garrulous, gossipy old countrywoman — and that's the way it struck me.

"Still, I made 'em both go over their stories. There isn't much to the deserted wife's evidence; she gives it to me in a whisper, with coughing spells in between. She was asleep in the bedroom; didn't hear the shot although she had a sort of drowsy feeling that something was happening outside. Then 'Mom' came and roused her and told her about the shooting, and right after that there were posse-men searching the house and searching all about it. I asked her as few questions as possible.

"I didn't have to ask the old crippled woman any — no need to prompt her; she was primed to go. Right away I found out that there was no hope of pumping her dry — hers was a bottomless reservoir of talk. And you couldn't steer her in any given direction. You just had to let nature take its course. And so, eventually, by scraps and fragments, and all mixed-in and mixed-up with about a thousand topics that had no bearing on the main subject, I got her story out of her. I pieced it together afterward: She had just crossed the gallery from the sick-room to the twin cabin where the cooking was done, when she heard the shot close by somewhere. She was as vague as the Padgetts had been as to the direction — couldn't be sure, she said, whether it sounded from this side or that, from above or from below. I remember her description: 'Mister,' she says, 'hit didn't crack, nice and sharpish; it seemed more to quote.' Now if you'll look it up in Marlowe — or maybe it's Spenser — you'll find that she was using 'quote' in the sense that our Elizabethan ancestors — and hers — used it: to denote a reverberating sound, a sound handed on. Up in the mountains they still speak Chaucerian English, as you know.

"Anyhow, she tells me that she turned around on her crutch and looked out of a little front window and saw what Padgett also claimed he saw,

except that in her case no citizens had as yet begun to appear and there was no one in her sight for the moment except the dazed county clerk and the dead man spraddled out over there in the court-house door.

"She made no bones of not caring for the late unlamented Trout. An outspoken old party, this was, thumping about over her cabin floor while I listened, with her shiny red crutch under her arm and the big brass ferrule on the bottom of it striking against the loose boards; and her lower jaw just working overtime. She said more than once that she'd known him from the time he was a child, and that he was from childhood an 'onlikely one' meaning by that, I took it, of an unpleasant or a sinister personality. She didn't stress her feelings against him nor did she minimize them. She merely had the candid matter-of-fact air of expressing a common prejudice which she shared with numbers of others. And then immediately she'd be off down some side-alley, airing her own views on this and that or dragging in some perfectly irrelevant neighborhood reminiscence.

"I came down off that hill with my eardrums throbbing — and feeling licked. So far as these households were concerned, I told myself I'd have to count them out of the equation; would have to look elsewhere for clues, if any. I'd given the terrain surrounding the two places only the most cursory of examinations; I did that before I scrambled down. After nearly four weeks there'd be no use looking for physical evidences on the flank of that bleak little knob and it sticking up out of the center of the town like a sore thumb. So far, I was certainly up against it.

"Do you ever have hunches? Well, I do, and sometimes they've yielded dividends when I've been up against a hard proposition. I wouldn't exactly call it intuition; I'll swear it's not deduction, because the reasoning process doesn't enter into it at all. I guess the right word is just hunch. Well, while I was eating dinner — they called it dinner — at the Grand, and giving the resident house-flies a hard battle between bites, all of a sudden a hunch came. And what the hunch told me to do was to go back up the hill. I followed the urge, too — didn't even wait for the green-apple pie — and in less than two hours from that time, that murder mystery was all wrapped up, signed, sealed and delivered, and I was packing my bag to leave Uniondale.

"I stopped first by the Padgetts'; made them repeat their statements; tried to draw them out along new lines. There weren't any new lines to draw them out on. So I knew — somehow I knew it — that my hunch hadn't sent me here. Then it must be the log-house higher up. It just nat-

urally had to be. The moment I got there and saw the lame woman sitting in an old rocking-chair in the gallery between the twin cabins sewing on something or other, I knew I was getting 'warm,' as we used to say when we were kids playing some hide-and-seek game. I knew that, too. Don't ask me how I did. But I did — that's enough.

"She didn't seem surprised to see me back so soon — neither surprised nor concerned. She said the sick woman was asleep and invited me to sit down. So I sat on the edge of the gallery where I could lean back against a side-wall and watch her, and I told her that to make sure I had things straight I wanted her, if she didn't mind, to tell me all over again what she remembered about the shooting. She said, very casually, that she didn't mind.

"It was a peaceful, drowsy afternoon — a Sunday. If it hadn't been for a preacher's voice coming booming up to us from a little church diagonally down below us where the Primitive Baptists were holding one of their all-day services, there wouldn't have been a sound, hardly, except birds calling and bees humming and locusts going it in the trees along the main street. I had the feeling that a hound must have when he hits on a blind scent that's still confused and pretty faint, but a trail, all the same, that's going to lead him somewhere sooner or later.

"I gave her her head and she went to it. Sandwiched in between all sorts of extraneous side-issues, the same entirely plausible tale I'd already heard from her came forth, by degrees. It was exactly the same — no contradictions, no changes, no stressing of this incidental point, no slurring-over of that important one. Something told me just having her repeat her story wouldn't help any. That subtle indefinable sign I was looking for would have to emerge from another source. Sitting there pretending to be taking in all her guinea-hen chatter, I studied her movements, the way she handled herself, the play of her expression and all. Now I observed little peculiarities of habit, little mannerisms about her which had more or less escaped me that morning during my preliminary scouting. For one thing, I noticed how full and firm her frame was. She might be overweight but she wasn't flabby. And when she gripped her crutch as she got up once to cross the floor and get something, her grip was strong and the tip of it came down hard and brisk on the planks. Sitting down, she kept the crutch balanced across her knees and she had a little trick of running her hand along it while she gassed along. For all her solidity, there was something mighty motherly about her.

"Still I wasn't getting anywhere; I realized that. At the end of an hour I

felt baffled — maybe 'thwarted' is the better word — as though the big secret was eluding me and yet was hiding right around the corner every minute of the time. It was somewhere close by if only I had the sense to put my finger on it. Finally, more to be making motions than for any really valid reason, because I already knew her story off by heart, I pulled out a note-book, telling her I intended to jot down the headings of what I'd found out from her and from the other witnesses in her vicinity.

" 'Let's see now,' I said, just stalling along, you understand, 'let's see — your name is Miss Elizabeth Johnson? Or is it Mrs. Johnson?'

" 'I hain't never been wedded, ef that's whut you mean,' she says. 'And the fust name ain't 'Lizabeth nor nuthin' very much like it.'

" 'But everybody around here calls you Aunt Lizzie,' I said, mildly astonished. 'It's set down so by my friend who was up here immediately after the killing.'

" 'Then your friend wuz pyure wrong,' she says. 'It mout sound like Lizzie but it ain't — hit's Lissy, fur short. My full entitled name, only I ain't heard it fur so long a spell that I mouty nigh furgit it myself sometimes, is Melissa Remembrance Johnson.'

"I almost fell off that rickety little porch — it was so like a lick between my eyes. Not plain Elizabeth Johnson, about as common a name, next to Mary Smith, as you could think of, but Melissa Remembrance Johnson, a name in a million. A name that fairly jumped at me out of the back part of my brain. And all in a flash I was reconstructing in my mind the picture of that field-kitchen of ours that a stray German shell, a nine-point-five, came along and scored a direct hit on, one August morning of 1918 up in front of Château Thierry. I saw myself helping to straighten out the mangled fragments of the four boys who'd been wiped out in that burst. I saw myself taking the 'dog tag' and what was left of the messed-up service papers off of one of those four bodies. I saw myself fumbling in the pockets of a coat, which had been blown half off of the poor kid, for further marks of identification, and finding the last page of a misspelt letter — part of the last page, rather, for the rest of that page and the rest of the letter were just so much charred, ripped-up scrap. But the part that was left bore words that because of what they said had branded themselves into my mind and it bore also a signature that I'd never forgotten and never would. I heard myself listening again while a young second lieutenant, the commander of the platoon to which the four boys belonged, said of this particular boy: 'Rotten luck

for that poor kid. He was marked to be sent back for discharge. Why the dam' fool doctors at home and at the base ever qualified him for active duty I don't know. But they did. And now, when he's as good as mustered out of the service, this gift from the Heinies scatters him all over the shop.'

"And I, out of all the people in France and out of all the people in the world, must be the one to hear what that young lieutenant said, and the one to read that tail-end fragment of a letter and then, moved by an impulse I can't explain, to tuck it back into that burnt pocket to be buried with that dead boy. And now I had to be the one to sit on this back-country hillside, with my brain whirling like a merry-go-round to the shock of an incredible discovery, while I fitted together, or tried to fit together, the pieces of this amazing, tragic jig-saw puzzle. It was a tremendous coincidence, of course. It was all of that, but it was more than coincidence. What was it then — nemesis, fate, judgment? You can tell me when I'm done.

"I could see light ahead of me, I was certain of that, but I didn't let on. Putting the next question, I tried to make my tone indifferent and I think I must have succeeded for she apparently never saw where I was driving for until a little farther along. 'You had a sort of foster-son who died in the service, didn't you?' I said, holding the pencil poised for a bluff at taking down the answer.

" 'No,' she says, 'he wuzn't no Foster, nor ary kin to 'em. The Foster connection, they live higher up the waters of Stubtoe than us. He wuz a Triplett — Johnny Tom Triplett was his name — and I taken him ez an orphant child after his own maw and paw died, and raised him like he wuz my own. He's the one died over thar in that fur-off land of France.'

" 'Oh, an adopted son?' I said.

" 'That's the word I've heared some of 'em use — " 'dopted," ' she says, 'but he wuz jest the same ez my flesh and blood to me.'

" 'I'm sure of it,' I said.

" 'He had a little baby sister, too,' she goes on. 'I taken her the same time I taken him.'

" 'Then it's probable,' I said, 'that on his papers — his soldier's papers — he would put down his sister's name as his next of kin, wouldn't he?'

" 'Yes, I reckin' so,' she says.

" 'And his place of residence?' I said; 'would he put that down as Uniondale?'

" 'No, suh,' she says, ' 'cause whar us-all-three lived at before he wuz tuck

fur a soldier wuz up at Farleyville six mile frum here up the creek; that wuz our post-office then. But in gin'ral us mounting folks don't call a settlement by no 'special name; we jest calls it "town." Ast one of us whar we lives at and we air prone to say on the waters of sich-and-sich a fork or sich-and-sich a creek.'

" 'Farleyville, eh?' That filled in the next blank for me; I was out in the clear now, making game steadily. 'And the sister's name?' I said.

" 'Likely it would be writ down on them papers ez Marthy Triplett,' she says.

" 'And where is she now?' I asked.

" 'Why, layin' right here in this house, Mister,' she says. ' 'Twuz quite some months after he wuz tuck away that she married off with that thar sorry scound'el of a Tobe Byers that's lately done run off and left her to live or else perish, ez mout be.'

"If the old woman suspected anything yet she didn't show it, not by look or voice or anything. The only thing was that for the first time she was making direct replies instead of flying off at tangents. That might not mean anything, though; probably it didn't. So I made ready to fire straight and hard at her. I said:

"'You wrote to your adopted son after he went overseas, I presume?'

" 'Yes,' she says; 'of'entimes I writ him.'

"But unless I was wrong, I had detected just a barely perceptible pause, an instantaneous spell of hesitation, between this question and her answer. 'You wrote him shortly before his death?'

" 'Doubtless I done so,' she says, but says it slowly, warily, almost reluctantly, as though sensing a trap set for her feet.

" 'Yes, you wrote him then,' I said, and as I said it I stood up and faced her. 'You wrote him a letter and you signed that letter with your full name.' I wasn't asking her now, I was telling her. 'And in that letter you used these words: "Son-boy, if you don't come back I'm going to kill the one that sent you there. He knowed you ain't fitten for a soldier but still he took and shoved you on in. And you and me both knows why he wanted for to get you out of the way. If you don't come back, it will be pure murder on his soul and I aim to kill him for it if it's the last thing I ever does. But say nothing; you and me will be the onliest two that ever does know about this." '

" 'You wrote that,' I said, 'and the man you meant was the man you killed four weeks ago — Adrian Trout.'

"She stiffened until the muscles of the backs of her hands where she gripped her crutch stood out like ropes. But her expression didn't change — I can swear to that.

" 'Mister,' she says, 'air you a conjure? Have you got in you the witchin' power?'

" 'Never mind that,' I says. 'You killed that man, didn't you?'

" 'Even so,' she says, keeping her voice flat and keeping it down. 'Through me the will of the 'vengin' Lawd God Almighty wuz made manifest, and I kilt him.'

" 'Did you shoot him from this gallery or from inside this house?' I said.

" 'Frum right back behind whar I'm a-settin' now,' she says. 'That's whar I done it frum, me sort of leanin' aginst them logs to stiddy myself and him a-standin' down thar whar the Lawd God, a-answerin' of my constant prayer, had done delivered him into my hands.'

" 'You'd been practicing to shoot him, hadn't you?' I said.

" 'No,' she says, 'that wuzn't needful. I never shot ary shoot before then; I ain't never shot nary one sence, Mister. I ain't rememberin' that I tried fur to draw a bead on him, even. I didn't have to, 'cause it done had come to me long before that when the time come, the bullet would be guided to find his wicked breast.'

" 'About the bullet, now,' I said. I was guessing a little although the answer seemed pretty plain. 'You made that bullet out of a soldier's button, didn't you?'

" 'Out of a button off'en Johnny Tom's coat,' she says. 'When I went down on them steamcars to that thar camp in Caroliny, where they had him herded up ag'inst the day they'd ship him away — the onliest time I ever set foot out of these native mountings — I asked him fur one button offen his coat. He 'lowed I craved it fur a keepsake and so he give it to me. Johnny Tom wuz ever a most biddable boy. I didn't tell him whut I purposed fur to do with it. I never told him nur ary livin' creature whut wuz my intent — only to him in that thar last letter. Mister, all whut I'm a-narratin' to you is the pyure truth.'

"But I knew that without her telling me — knew it wasn't in her to lie. I said: 'In that letter you intimated that there was some second reason other than his having pushed your son through the draft-board examination, why you hated this man you've confessed to killing. Hadn't you better tell me what that reason was?'

" 'I'm a-comin' to that,' she says. 'He lusted after Marthy, same ez he had lusted after many another pore gal in these mountings. And Johnny Tom, puny ez he wuz, stood betwixt him and his carnal cravin's. So he aimed fur to git Johnny Tom out of his path, and this here draft give him his bounden chance. So with Johnny Tom snatched up and carried off fur a soldier, there ain't nobody left a-standin' 'twixt him and Marthy excusin' it's me. So to save her pore weak body frum him and to save her pore soul frum the everlastin' torments of Hell's fire, I aiged her on into weddin' with this here Tobe Byers, a-knowin' him fur a low-down, no-worth fiest, but a-doin' it 'cause it seemed like there wuzn't no other way out. And so this here Tobe Byers, he starves her thin and wears her down and breaks her little heart, and when she's done plum' wore-out, he flees frum her and leaves her fur to die. Johnny Tom and Marthy — my onliest two — one gone and other one goin' — and one man to blame fur 'em both.'

"There's no passion in her voice while she's saying this. She's just saying it, just so, that's all. And I know that every word she's saying is the truth, as she sees it. Then she says, still without any dramatics: 'Well, Mister, now that you do know all, whut do you aim fur to do with me? I ain't 'shamed fur whut I done and I wouldn't be 'feared fur whut's to come to me, only fur Marthy. With me in the jailhouse, whut'll Marthy do? That's all I'm feared fur.'

"She wasn't pleading, understand. She merely was stating a case.

" 'I'll tell you what I'm going to do with you,' I said; my decision was already made and confirmed. 'I'm going to leave you right here where you are. I'm not going to say a word about this to the sheriff or anybody, and unless you should talk yourself, nobody is going to be any the wiser about what the two of us know.'

"She didn't thank me in words; the look she gave me and the nod she gave me were enough. I held out my hand, not to shake hands with her but for something else, and she knew what I wanted and handed it over — her crutch. Oh, yes, I'd had my eye on that crutch for some little time past. It was a very heavy, very cumbersome thing, and I'd say it had about six separate coats of red paint on it, not to speak of the elaborate cloth padding. And why wouldn't it be heavy and cumbersome, and why wouldn't it be well painted and well-padded when the stock part of it was the octagonal barrel of an old-fashioned, muzzle-loading squirrel-rifle with the forearm shaved away; and with its stock cut down and fitted into the arm-crotch,

and with that big brass ferrule slipped over the muzzle; and with the lock part — the trigger and trigger-guard and the hammer — so nicely hidden away under the cloth where the hand-grip came. A beautifully done job, if you're asking me. I hefted it, fingered it all over, slipped off the ferrule, slipped it back on again and hammered it fast, and then handed the thing back to her. 'Aunt Lissy,' I said to her, reaching for my hat, 'I've told you what I'm going to do with you — and that's nothing whatsoever. Now I'm telling you something I'm going to do for you: I'll be in Chattanooga by this time to-morrow. As soon as I get there I'm going to buy you a regular crutch out of a store and send it back up here by a messenger that can be trusted. As soon as you get that new crutch I want you to take this old one of yours and break it up and bury the pieces separately, deep down underground where nobody can ever find them.'

" 'I will, Mister,' she says.

"We shook hands on it and I came on away. And so that's the story that old Mr. Green-head here reminded me of. . . . Any more coffee left in that bottle, d'ye think?"

"Wow!" I said. "I'd like to write that yarn sometime and try to sell it."

"Go right ahead," Thorne said. "It couldn't do any harm. Marthy's dead and Aunt Lissy died two years ago — I sort of kept track of her. And if you don't use my right name and change some of the other names I can't see where writing it could do any harm, although it might jar up Fred Gaither a little. Oh, by the way, while we're on the subject, I want to ask you something: What would you say was the most unusual feature of the whole thing — my having been the one who read that scrap of writing over in front of Château Thierry that time? Or that old woman, using one of the most awkward weapons you can imagine — a stock that she couldn't get up to her shoulder because of its added length, and a barrel that she couldn't aim down — that old woman being able to fire right center to the target of a man's heart seventy-five yards away from her? Or what?"

I did some swift but intensive thinking. Then:

"I'd say the strangest part of it was her ability to keep the secrets of her deadly hate and her deadly plot to herself when, as you tell me, she was such an everlasting gabbler on every other possible subject."

"Proving," said Thorne, "that great minds run in the same channel. That's exactly what I claim. . . . Well, yonder comes Jerome with the pirogue. It's just as well, there'll be no more gunning to-day."

It is not the Editors' policy to print "short short stories," but Miss Shore's story is so superb we had to pass it along to you. A hitherto unpublished story.

TELL IT TO THE JUDGE

by VIOLA BROTHERS SHORE

THE WOMAN Judge made her way through the crowded restaurant. The stout attorney at a far table watched her over his newspaper — noting how the famous smile, so familiar to the metropolitan dailies, lit up her fine, friendly face as she paused at a table to congratulate the newly appointed secretary to the mayor. But he noted also how the plump shoulders sagged under their Persian lamb burden. The attorney knew those shoulders. He had been married to them for twenty-five years.

He ordered a special drink from the waiter and drew a chair nearer to his own. She dropped into it gratefully, unhooking the Persian lamb collar. "Sam —" she began plaintively.

"I know —" he said, lifting the coat from her shoulders — "This was one of those days. You wonder why you ever went onto the bench. If you had only devoted yourself to your three wonderful children — and your kind, neglected husband!" After twenty-five years he could write her dialogue. And vice versa, of course. "Here comes your cocktail, Mama. You'll feel a lot better."

The Judge sighed and opened a black antelope purse, voluminous but smart, like the Judge herself. "Sam, dear, read this —" she pleaded and pushed over a newspaper clipping.

The attorney read — his face expressionless. The owner of a sawmill somewhere in the northwest had been shot. A workman had given himself up, been tried and acquitted — in spite of his admission that he had been secreted in the murdered man's house at the time of the shooting.

He laid down the clipping without comment, knowing that she would tell him — that nothing short of fire and pandemonium would keep her from telling him — and then only temporarily. "What do you want to eat, Mama?"

The Judge was staring unhappily into her cocktail. "I guess I never told

you this, but just before we went to Havana on our vacation, a man accosted me as I was coming out of Court. He looked like a poor workman, a foreigner. I think I can remember just what he said —"

"I'm sure you can," said the attorney resignedly, and ignored the hopeful eye of the waiter. . . .

"Judge, I read about you in papers. I know you are friend of poor man. I got friend, Judge, in terrible trouble. You gi'm odwice, huh Judge?"

"That all depends — What kind of trouble?"

"I tell you errything. My frien' Joe he work in sawmill. Big Boss wery mean man. You don' like something? Bang! He break your nose. You go in Hell —! Joe he work for Big Boss nine — ten year — no lose day — no make trouble. He got fi-six kids. He don' wan' no trouble. On'y work and send kids in school.

"One day is occident in mill. Noo fella he lose arm. Errybody holler is Boss' fault! Why he don' fix moshine! Joe he big fella an' he holler too — plenny loud. Foreman say, 'Sherrup you! You got too big mouth!' An' he fire Joe. After nine — ten year he tell Joe, 'You go get time-check!' Joe he got fi-six kids. He need job. What he's gone do?"

"Can't his union do anything?"

"What union! We tuk union we gerrout putty quick! Errybody is scare when foreman fire Joe — errybody go back to work quick. Joe say, 'This is no right. This is Ommerica. I go see Big Boss — I tell him! You betcha!'

"Big Boss he don' wan' see Joe — but Joe he wait — wait — and finely he see Big Boss. He say, 'Looka here, Mr. Thompson — is no right I get fire. I don' do nothing. You moshine is bum!' Big Boss holler on him an' Joe get mad. 'Goddamn,' he say, 'you can' do this — !' But Big Boss he wery big man — bigger as Joe — an' he don' like for argue with workman. He smash Joe one in face — break his nose. Is bad for Joe, no — ?"

"Why doesn't he go to the police?"

"Who — Joe — ? He don' got to. They come for him. Big Boss say, 'Lock him up. He big trouble-maker! Bod fella!' Sheriff — police — they all like Mr. Thompson. No like Joe. Thutty day he sit in jail — nobuddy know where he is. Because they tell him they kick his teeth out if he open his mouth. Thutty day he sit and think — think — 'What kind Hitler *is* this Mr. Thompson. . . .'

"When he finely go home somebuddy else live in his house. Joe's wife an'

kids they gone away. Joe think maybe he go nuts. But bimeby he fine them by his sister-in-low, in barn. Is old barn an' all kids is cold and hungry. Baby is sick with croup. Costs fifty cent a mile for doctor come way out in farm. Joe corry baby in hospital — eight mile. Is no good for croup. Is no good for Joe too. He make up his mine he gotta do something. 'I gone kill this sonabitch,' he say an' he get gun from pownshop. Then he go to house where Big Boss live.

"Big Boss he got plenny guard — all aroun' — but Joe he get ride in lowndry wagon. Then he wait behin' bush and bimeby he climb in winda. He hide in closet and when Big Boss come in, Joe he think, 'I'm gone shoot you sonabitch as soon you stan' still!'

"Big Boss holler, 'Who open that goddam winda?' An jus' when he put up his han' to shut winda — Boom! Bang! An' Big Boss fall down. Joe jump out winda an' run like hell. He think they gone hang him — an' poor Joe he don' wan' that —"

"If he took the law in his own hands, no matter what the provocation, he's got to pay! If he killed that man —"

"But he don', Judge. He got gun, but he don' fire it."

"*What* — ?"

He said again, "Joe don' fire those shot. Somebody else shoot this Big Boss through open winda. Joe climb ower fence an' hide in frien's house. But he plenny scared. Police know he have fight with Big Boss. They will fine he buy gun in pownshop. Lowndry man will say he drive Joe in. They will fine footprint under winda. They hang him sure if they get him. So now, Judge, please, you gimme odwice for Joe."

"He's got to give himself up. If he didn't fire the shot, he can prove it."

"How, Judge? First they string him up. Then maybe somebuddy's gone prove. Who's gone believe Joe?"

"You — his friends — all of you — you must *make* them believe you! The man who fired the shots must have left some traces. There must be *two* sets of footprints under that window — Joe's and the other man's. Joe's gun will show that it wasn't fired. And the bullets will be a different calibre. Any number of things will prove Joe is innocent!"

"You sure, Judge? You odwise he gi'mself up?"

"By all means. But first get him a lawyer. Then let his lawyer agree to give Joe up, providing he has certain safeguards. A good lawyer will know what to do."

"Good lawyer is for company — not for poor man —"

"There are plenty of lawyers who will defend a poor man. If you can't find one, go down and see my husband. I'm sure he'll help you!"

The Judge picked up her glass. Her throat was quite dry. The attorney glanced down at the clipping. "I don't recall the man ever coming to see me —" He studied the paper, frowning. "Joe Rudich — No, I don't recall the name. But you seem to have given him good advice. According to this, there were two sets of footprints found under the window of Thompson's library. Rudich's gun had not been fired. And it was a different calibre from the shot which killed Thompson. I'm sure his action, in voluntarily coming forward, must have weighed strongly in his favor. So what are you upset about? You gave him excellent advice."

The Judge lifted stricken eyes. "Sam, didn't you notice the date of that shooting? It happened on the same day we arrived in Havana!"

The attorney sat up suddenly. "My God! You gave him the advice — *before* — ?"

"Before we went away to Havana for our vacation — *before* the murder occurred!" She nodded miserably. "And I remember, now, he had a broken nose. . . ."

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THE BLOOMSBURY WONDER

by THOMAS BURKE

I

As THAT September morning came to birth in trembling silver and took life in the hue of dusty gold, I swore.

I had risen somewhat early and was standing at the bathroom window of my Bloomsbury flat shaving. I first said something like "Ooch!" and then I said something more intense. The cause of these ejaculations was that I had given myself the peculiarly nasty kind of cut that you can only get from a safety-razor, and the cause of the cut was a sudden movement of the right elbow, and the cause of that was something I had seen from my window.

Through that gracious gold, which seemed almost like a living presence blessing the continent of London, moved a man I knew. But a man I knew transformed into a man I did not know. He was not hurrying, which was his usual gait. He wasn't even walking. He was sailing. I never saw such a schoolgirl step in a man. I never saw such rapture in the lift of a head.

He was not tall, but he was so thin, and his clothes fitted so tightly, that he gave an illusion of height. He wore a black double-breasted overcoat, buttoned at the neck, black trousers and nondescript hat. He held his arms behind him, the right hand clasping the elbow of the left arm. His slender trunk was upright, and his head thrown back and lifted.

In the dusty sunlight he made a silhouette. I saw him in the flat only. And I realised then that I always had seen him in the flat; never all round him. The figure he cut in that sunlight made me want to see round him, though what I should find I did not know and could not guess. And to this day I don't know and can't guess.

II

In conventional society, I suppose, he would have been labelled a queer creature, this Stephen Trink; but the inner quarters of London hold so

many queer creatures, and I have so wide an acquaintance among them, that Trink was just one of my crowd. I forget how I came to know him, but for about two years we had been seeing each other once or twice a week; sometimes oftener. I liked him almost at once, and the liking grew. Although I was always aware in his company of a slight unease, I took every opportunity of meeting him. He charmed me. The charm was not the open, easy charm of one's intimate friend, for we never reached that full contact. It was more spell than charm; the attraction of opposites, perhaps. His only marked characteristic was a deep melancholy, and now that I try to recall him I find that that is the one clear thing that I can recall. He was one of those men whom nobody ever really knows.

Stephen Trink would have been passed over in any company, and at my place always was. Only when I directed my friends' attention to him, did they recollect having met him and examine their recollection; and then they were baffled. I once asked five friends in turn what they thought of him, and I was given pictures of five totally different men, none of whom I had myself seen in Trink. Each of them, I noted, had to hesitate on my question, and stroke his hair, and say: "'M . . . Trink. We-el, he's just an ordinary sort of chap — I mean — he's a — sort of —" Then, although he had been with us ten minutes ago, they would go on to draw a picture as from hazy memory. They seemed to be describing a man whom they weren't sure they had seen. Their very detail was the fumbling detail of men who are uncertain what they did see, and try to assure themselves by elaboration that they did at any rate see *something*. It was as though he had stood before the camera for his photograph, and the developed plate had come out blank.

In appearance, as I say, he was insignificant, and, with his lean, questing face and frail body, would have passed anywhere as an insipid clerk. He stressed his insipidity by certain physical habits. He had a trick of standing in little-girl attitudes — hands behind back, one foot crooked round the other — and of demurely dropping his eyes if you looked suddenly at him; and, when speaking to you, looking up at you as though you were his headmaster. He had, too, a smile that, though it sounds odd when used of a man, I can only describe as winsome. The mouth was sharp-cut, rather than firm, and drooped at the corners. The lower jaw was drawn back. His hair was honey-coloured and plastered down. His voice was thin, touched with the east wind; and it was strange to hear him saying the warm, generous things he did say about people in the sleety tone that goes with spite. To everything

he said that tone seemed to add the words: *Isn't it disgusting?* His eyes, behind spectacles, were mild and pale blue. Only when the spectacles were removed did one perceive character; then, one could see that the eyes held curious experience and pain.

Wherever he might be, he never seemed to be wholly *there*. He had an air of seeming to be listening to some noise outside the room. He would sit about in attitudes that, since Rodin's Penseur, we have come to accept as attitudes of thought; but if you looked at his face you'd say it was empty. He was not thinking; he was brooding. Though indoors he was languid and lounge-y, and his movements were the movements of the sleepwalker, in the street his walk was agitated and precipitous. He seemed to be flying from pursuit. One other notable point about him was that, quiet, insignificant, withdrawn as he was, he could be a most disturbing presence. Even when relaxed in an arm-chair he somehow sent spears and waves of discomfort through the air, sucking and drying the spirit of the room and giving me that edge of unease.

What his trouble was — if his melancholy arose from a trouble — he never told me. Often, when I urged him, flippantly, to Cheer Up, he spoke of This Awful Burden, but I dismissed it as the usual expression of that intellectual weariness of living which we call "modern."

He had private means by which he could have lived in something more than comfort, but he seemed contented with three rooms in the forlorn quarter where Bloomsbury meets Marylebone — well-furnished rooms that one entered with surprise from the dinge of Fitzroy Square. He was a member of two of the more serious clubs, but used them scarcely twice a year. His time he employed in the Bloomsbury and Marylebone fashion — as an aimless intellectual. He occupied himself writing metallic studies for all sorts of hole-and-corner Reviews; and all the time he was doing it he affected to despise himself for doing it and to despise the breed with whom he mixed. He attended all their clique and coterie gatherings — teas, dinners, Bloomsbury salons, private views — and took part in all the frugal follies of the Cheyne Walk Bohemia. You saw him, as they say, everywhere. Yet, at all these affairs, though he looked younger than most of the crowd, he had always the attitude of the amused grownup overlooking the antics of the nursery. I can't think how even their pallid wits didn't perceive that embodied sneer at them and their doings.

Although not physically strong he had immense vitality, which he ex-

hibited in long night walks through London. This was a habit which I shared with him and which, begun in childhood, gave me my peculiar and comprehensive knowledge of the hinterland of this continent of London. I believe that it was on one of these night wanderings that we first really met, though there must have been a perfunctory introduction in somebody's flat. Knowing that I was an early riser, he would sometimes, at the end of one of these rambles, knock me up at half-past seven for breakfast, and then go to sleep on my settee. Glad as I always was to have his company, he was a difficult guest. He had a disorderly mind and Japanese ideas of time. A "look-in" often meant that he would stay for four or five hours, and an arrangement to dine and spend the evening often meant that he would look-in for ten minutes and then abruptly disappear without a word about dinner. He had a habit of using in casual conversation what is called bad language — a certain sign of uneasy minds — and his talk was constantly agitated with purposeless use of "blasted," and "bloody" and "bastard." In all other matters he was gentle and thoughtful. He would not, as they say, do anything for anybody, but for a few people his time and labour and influence were available in full measure. He was so kind of spirit, so generous of affection, that sometimes I thought that his melancholy arose from a yearning to love and be loved. At other times this would be contradicted by his self-sufficiency.

And that, I think, is all I can tell you about him. He eludes me on paper as he eluded me in life. So with this light sketch I pass on to the real matter of this story — to his friends, the Roakes; for it was by his friendship with them that I was brought into contact with horror.

Another of our points in common was a wide range of friendships. Most men find their acquaintance among their own "sort" or their own "set," and never adventure beyond people of like education, like tastes, and like social circumstances. I have never been able to do that, nor Trink. We made our friends wherever we found them, and we found them in queer places. An assembly of all our friends at one meeting in our rooms would have surprised (and dismayed) those of them who knew us only as writers in such-and-such circumstances. I had, of course, a number of close friends among fellow-authors and among musicians, but my most intimate friend at that time, who knew more about me than any other creature, was an old disciple of Madame Blavatsky, who devoted his spare time to original research on the lost Atlantis. Trink's was a shop-keeper; a man who kept what

is called a "general" shop at the northern end of Great Talleyrand Street.

Despite my own assorted friendships, I could never quite understand *this* friendship, for the man had no oddities, no character, no corner where he even grazed the amused observation of Trink. It may have been, of course — and this fact explains many ill-assorted friendships — that they liked the same kind of funny story, or walked at the same pace in the streets. I don't know. Friendships *are* bound by slender things like that. Or it may have been — and I think this is what it was — that they were bound by love. I am sure there was more in it than mere liking of each other's talk and company, for Trink, being what he was, could have found no pleasure in the pale copy-book talk of Horace Roake. I thought I could perceive on either side an essence or aura of devotion, and if the devotion were at all stronger on one side, it was on the side of the cultivated man of brains rather than the tired, brainless shop-keeper. I spent many evenings in their company, either at Trink's flat or in the shop-parlour, and I noted their content in long silences, when they merely sat together and smoked, and their quick, voiceless greeting when they met. Trink seemed to be happier in Roake's shabby room than anywhere. *Why* was one of his mysteries.

Although the public spoke of Roake's shop as a General Shop, he did not himself recognise that style. There are traditions in these matters. In trade-lists there are no drapers, or milkmen, or greengrocers, or ironmongers. The man we style milkman styles himself dairyman, though he may never have seen a dairy. The greengrocer is a pea and potato salesman. The bookmaker is a commission agent. Drapers and ironmongers are haberdashers and dealers in hardware. The butcher is a purveyor of meat, the publican a licensed victualler. So Mr. Roake, who kept no pastas or Chianti, or Bolognas or Garlic, styled himself Italian warehouseman. His shop stood, as I say, at the northern end of Great Talleyrand Street, between Woburn Place and Gray's Inn Road.

This is a district of long, meaningless streets and disinherited houses. Once, these houses were the homes of the prosperous; today they have only faded memories. They lie, these streets and houses, in an uneasy coma, oppressed by a miasma of the second-hand and the outmoded — second-hand shops, second-hand goods, second-hand lodgings, filled with second-hand furniture, and used by second-hand people breathing second-hand denatured air.

When Roake set up his shop here, he blunderingly chose the apt setting

for himself and his family. They belonged there. They were typical of a thousand decent, hardworking, but stagnant families of our cities. For four generations the family had not moved its social level. A faint desire to rise they must have had, but rising means adventure, and they feared adventure. On the wife's side and the husband's side the strain was the same — luke-warm and lackadaisical. There they had stood, these many years, like rootless twigs in the waste patch between the stones and the pastures; and there, since the only alternative was risk and struggle, they were content to stand. Roake himself, if I saw him truly, had the instincts of the aristocrat hidden in the habits of the peasant. One of life's misfits. He had the fine feature and clean eye of that type, but though he looked like what is called a gentleman, nobody would have mistaken him for one. His refinement of feature and manner came really, not from the breeding of pure strains, but from under-nourishment in childhood. He had a mind of wide, if aimless, interests, and a certain rough culture acquired by miscellaneous reading.

His wife was largely of his sort, but without the culture. Her life had been a life of pain and trial, and it had taught her nothing. Her large, soft face was expressionless. The thousand experiences of life had left not even a finger-print there, and she still received the disappointments and blows of fortune with indignation and querulous collapse.

There were two boys and a girl. The girl had something of her father's physical refinement. Her head and face were beautiful; so beautiful that people turned to glance at her as she passed in the streets. Her manners and voice were — well, dreadful. She would often respond to those admiring glances by putting out her tongue. She was wholly unconscious of her beauty, not because she was less vain than her sex, but because her beauty was not to her own taste. She admired and envied girls of florid complexion and large blue eyes and masses of hair and dimpled mouths — chocolate-box beauties — and her own beauty was a glorious gift thrown to the dogs. To see that grave dark head and those deep-pool Madonna eyes set against those sprawling manners and graceless talk gave one a shudder.

Of the two boys, one might say that they saw life as nothing but a programme of getting up, going to work, working, eating, going to bed. Only it wouldn't be true. They saw life no more than a three-months' old baby sees life. They were clods.

These were the people Trink had chosen as friends, and by all of them he

was, not adored, for they were incapable of that, but liked to the fullest extent of their liking. He was their honoured guest, and on his side he gave them affection and respect. The two boys worked together in a boot and shoe factory, and the shop was run by Mr. and Mrs. Roake and the girl, Olive. Olive knew enough about the business to do her bit without any mental strain, and she had a flow of smiles and empty chatter that in such a shop was useful.

These General Shops — often spoken of as "little gold-mines" — are usually set, like this one, in side-streets. It is by their isolated setting that they flourish. The main streets are not their territory, and such a shop in a main street would certainly fail, for these streets hold branches of the multiple stores as well as shops devoted singly to this or that household necessity. Your successful General Shop, then, chooses a situation as far from competition as possible, but in the centre of a thicket of houses. In that situation it wins its prosperity from the housewife's slips of memory. She arrives home from her High Street shopping, and finds that she has forgotten salt or custard-powder or bacon, and to save a mile walk she sends one of the children to the General Shop. It is for this that it exists; not for regular supply but as convenience in emergency. Unhampered by other shops and encircled by hundreds of forgetful households, the well-conducted General is certain of success, and many of these shops have a weekly turnover, made up of pennyworths of this and ounces of that, near two hundred pounds.

So the Roakes were doing well. Indeed, they were very comfortable and could have been more than comfortable; but they were so inept, and knew so little of the art of useful spending, that their profits showed little result in the home. If they could not be given the positive description of a happy family, at least they lived in that sluggish sympathy which characters only faintly aware of themselves give each other; and that was the feeling of the home — lymphatic and never *quite*. The wireless set worked, but it was never in perfect tone. The sitting-room fire would light, but only after it had been coaxed by those who knew its "ways." The hot water in the bathroom was never more than very warm. The flowers in the back-garden were never completely and unmistakably blossoms. The shop-door would shut, but only after three sharp pressures — the third a bad-tempered one. They bought expensive and warranted clocks, and the clocks took the note of the family, and were never "right." New and better pieces of furniture were frequently bought for the sitting-room, but it never succeeded in looking

furnished. If you saw the house, you could imagine the family; if you met the family, you could imagine the house.

Hardly a family, one would think, marked out for tragedy, or even for disaster; yet it was upon these lustreless, half-living people that a blind fury of annihilation rushed from nowhere and fell, whirling them from obscurity and fixing their names and habits in the scarlet immortality of the Talleyrand Street Shop Murder.

It was about the time when those gangs called "The Boys" were getting too cocksure of their invulnerability, and were extending their attentions from rival gangs and publicans to the general public, that the catastrophe came by which Stephen Trink lost his one close friend. Beginning with sub-Post Offices, the gangs passed to the little isolated shops. From all parts of London came reports of raids on these shops. The approach was almost a formula. "Give us a coupler quid. Come on," or "We want a fiver. Quick. Gonna 'and over or gonna 'ave yer place smashed up?" Given that alternative the little shopkeeper could do nothing but pay. He *might* have refused, and have had his place smashed up, and he might have been lucky enough to get the police along in time to catch two or three of the gang and get them six months or twelve months each. But that wouldn't have hurt *them*, since their brutal and perilous ways of life make them utterly fearless; and he would still be left with a smashed shop, pounds'-worth of damaged and unsaleable goods, the loss of three or four days' custom during repairs, and no hope of compensation from anybody. So, as a matter of common sense, he first paid up, and then reported the matter to the police; and serious citizens took up his grievance, and wrote to the papers and asked what we supported a police force for, etc., etc.

Then, sharply on top of a dozen of these shop-raids, came the murder of the Roakes.

III

Marvellous and impenetrable is the potency of words. Hear the faint spirit-echo of *Shelley;* the cold Englishness of *Shakespeare;* the homespun strength of *John Bunyan.* And so it is with ideas; and so, particularly, with that idea for which sign and sound is MURDER.

Now, by long association, murder is linked in our minds with midnight, or at least, with dark; and these two conceptions of the cloaked side of nature combine in dreadfulness to make deeper dread. Again, poetic justice. But

harmonious combinations of dreadfulness, though they intensify each other, are dreadfulness only, and are therefore less potent to pluck at the heart than dreadfulness in discord with its setting; for there comes in the monstrous. Rape of womanhood is dreadful but understandable. Rape of childhood goes beyond the dreadful into depths that the mind recoils from sounding. Murder at midnight, though it will shock as it has shocked through centuries of civilisation, is a shock in its apt setting. But murder in sunlight is a thought that freezes and appals. It bares our souls to the satanic shudder of blood on primroses.

One can catch, then, the bitter savour of a certain moment of a sunny afternoon in Great Talleyrand Street. From the few horrified words of a neighbor I am able to reconstruct the whole scene.

IV

It was just after three o'clock of a September afternoon — a September of unusual heat; hotter than the summer had been. The heat made a blanket over the city, and in the side-streets life was in arrest, bound in slumber and steam and dust. In Great Talleyrand Street carts and cars stood outside shops and houses as though they would never move again. Even the shops had half-closed their eyes. Errand boys and workless labourers lounged or lay near the shops, sharing jealously every yard of the shade afforded by the shop-blinds. The faded Regency houses stewed and threw up a frowst. Through its dun length, from its beginning near Gray's Inn to its nebulous end somewhere in St. Pancras, the heat played in a fetid shimmer and shrouded either end in an illusion of infinity. The gritty odours of vegetable stalls, mixed with the acrid fumes of the cast-off-clothes shops, were drawn up in the sun's path to float in the air and fret the noses of the loungers. The ice-cream cart, zones with the Italian colours, made a cool centre for the idle young. A woman was offering chrysanthemums from a barrow piled high with that flower. Her barrow and her apron made a patch of living gold against the parched brown of the street.

Then, into this purring hour, came a figure and a voice. From the upper end of the street it came, crying one word; and the blunt syllables of that word went through the heat and dust, and struck the ears of those within hearing with the impact of cold iron. The street did not stir into life. It exploded.

Those nearest scrambled up, crying — not saying; such is the power of

that word that it will always be answered with a cry — crying: "Where? Where?" "In there — there — three-ninety-two." And the man ran on to Tenterden Street, still crying, "Murder!" and those who had heard the word ran in a trail to number 392.

The shop with its battling odours of bacon, cheese, paraffin, spice, biscuits, bread, pickles, was empty. The runners looked beyond it. A small door led from the shop to the back parlour. The upper half of the door was of glass, and this half was veiled by a soiled lace curtain. Its purpose was to screen the folk in the parlour — where they sat at intervals between trade rushes — from the eyes of customers, while those in the parlour could, by the greater light of the shop, see all comers. But since the curtain served a purely work-aday office — the private sitting-room was upstairs — it had been allowed to over-serve its time, and frequent washings had left it with so many holes that its purpose was defeated. People in the shop could, by those holes, see straight and clearly into the parlour; could see the little desk with account-books and bills, and could often see the cashbox and hear the rattle of accountancy. It was proved by experiment that a man on the threshold of the shop could, without peering, see what was going on in the shop-parlour.

The leaders of the crowd looked hastily about the shop and behind the two small counters; then, through those holes, they had the first glimpse of what they had come to see.

The sun was at the back. It shone through the garden window, and made a blurred shaft of dancing motes across the worn carpet and across the bloody body of Horace Roake. He lay beside his desk. The back of his head was cleanly broken. By the door leading to the inner passage lay the body of Mrs. Roake. She lay with hands up, as though praying. Her head was flung violently back, disjointed. Of the two boys, who had been spending the last day of their holidays at home, the younger, Bert, lay in a corner by the window, almost in a sitting posture. His head hung horridly sideways, showing a dark suffusion under the left ear. The leaders looked and saw; then someone said "The girl!" They pulled open the door leading to passage and kitchen. In the sun-flushed passage lay the twisted body of Olive Roake. Her head, too, was thrown back in contortion. One glance at the dark excoriations on her neck told them how she had met her death. Three glances told them of the dreadful group that must have made entrance here: one to kill with a knife, one with a blow, and one to strangle with the hands.

For some seconds those inside could not speak; but as the crowd from the

street pushed into the shop, and those in the shop were pushed into the parlour, those inside turned to push them back; and one of them, finding voice, cried uselessly, as is the way in dark moments: "Why? Why all this — these nice people — just for a pound or two? It's — it's *unnecessary!*"

He was right, and this was felt more strongly when it was found that this thing had not been done for a pound or two. The desk was locked, and the cashbox and the two tills in the shop were intact. Clearly this was not haphazard killing for robbery. There was a grotesquerie about the scene that hinted at more than killing: an afterthought of the devilish. These people, who had led their ignoble but decent lives in ignoble back streets, were made still more ignoble in death. The battered head of Roake, the crumpled bulk of Mrs. Roake, the macabre mutilation of the gracious symmetry of youth and maidenhood, were more than death. Not only were they dead, but the peace that touches the most ugly and malign to dignity, the one moment of majesty that is granted at last to us all, was denied them. The temple of the Holy Ghost was riven and left in the derisive aspect of a dead cat in a gutter.

So they lay in the floating sunshine of that afternoon, and so the crowd stood and stared down at them until the police came. Who had done this thing? How did they do it in an open shop? How did they get away?

Then someone who knew the family cried, "Where's Artie?" And some went upstairs and some went into the little garden. But all that they found was an open bedroom window and signs of a flight. No Artie.

V

It was between three o'clock and half past of the day when I had given myself that nasty cut that Trink made one of his "drop-in" calls. I was accustomed to these calls. He would come in, potter about, turn over any new books or periodicals I had, make a few remarks about nothing, disturb the atmosphere generally, and then slide away. But this afternoon he didn't disturb the atmosphere. He seemed lighter and brighter than usual. Something of that morning mood that I had seen in him seemed to be still with him. Tired and pale he certainly was — the result of his night-walk, I guessed — but there was a serenity about him that was both new and pleasing. For almost the first time I felt fully at ease with him; no longer conscious of the something that I had never been able to name. In that quarter of an hour I seemed to be nearer to him and to know him better than I had ever

known him. To put it into a crude colloquialism, he seemed *more human.* He stayed but a short time, not fidgeting, but sitting restfully on the settee in that complete ease that one knows after long physical exercise. I remarked on this. I told him that I had seen him from my window, bouncing through the square, and told him that the bouncing and his present mood proved that plenty of exercise was what he needed, and that he would probably find, as George Borrow found, that it was a potent agent for the conquest of accidie — or, I added, liver. He smiled; dismissed the diagnosis of his trouble, and soon afterwards went, or, rather, faded away, so that when I resumed work I was barely certain that he had been with me at all.

About an hour later I became aware that I was disturbed, and when, half-consciously and still at work, I located it as something coming from the street; a sound that came at first from below the afternoon din, then rose to its level and spilled over it. It was the cry of newspaper boys.

As my flat is three floors up (no lift) I did not send out for a paper, but I rang up a friend on the *Evening Mercury*, and asked what the big story was. He gave me the story so far as it had then come in.

After the first shock, my first thought was of what it would mean to Trink. Terrible as the fate of that family was, they meant little to me, and I could only feel for them the detached and fleeting pity that we feel at any reported disaster. For you will have noted, as a kink of human nature, that nobody ever does feel sympathy for a murdered man. All our interest — yes, and a perverse, half-guilty sympathy — is on the murderer. But for Trink, their friend, it would be a blow, and a keener blow since it came with such ghastly irony on top of his happy, swinging mood of that day. He had just, it seemed, found some respite from his customary gloom, only to be brutally flung back into it, and deeper. I thought at first of going round to him, and then I thought not. He would want no intruders.

Meantime, the papers were publishing rush extras, and as the news had withdrawn me from work, and I could not return to it, I went out and bought the three evening papers, and sat in a tea-shop reading them.

There was no doubt that the affair, following on the large publicity and discussion given to the shop-raids, had stirred the press and alarmed the public. I saw it on the faces of the home-going crowd and heard it reflected in the casual remarks of stranger to stranger in the tea-shop and around the 'buses. All that evening and night the word Murder beat and fluttered about the streets and alleys and suburban avenues, and wherever it brushed it left

a smear of disquiet. Accustomed as London is to murder, and lightly, even flippantly as it takes all disturbances, the details of this one moved them, for clearly it was no ordinary murder of anger or revenge, or for the removal of inconvenient people for gain. How could these little people have offended? Who would want them out of the way? If it was the work of "The Boys," it might be anybody's turn next. If it wasn't the work of "The Boys," then, said the press, it must have been the work of wandering lunatics of gorilla's strength and ferocity. And if they were loose, nobody would be safe. Private houses and people in the streets would be wholly at the mercy of such fearless and furious creatures as these appeared to be. In the meantime they *were* loose; even now, perhaps, prowling about and contemplating another stroke; sitting by your side in train or 'bus, or marking your home or shop for their next visit. They were loose, and while they were loose they spread their dreadful essence as no artist or prophet can hope to spread *his*. Scores of mothers from the streets about Talleyrand Street, hearing the news and seizing on the Press conjecture of wandering madmen, ran to schools in the district to meet their children. They were always aware of peril from the filth that hovers about playground gates; today they were made aware of a more material and annihilating peril.

Through all the thousand little streets of the near and far suburbs went the howl of the newsboy, and its virulent accents went tingling through the nerves of happy households. To people sitting late in their gardens, veiled from the world, came at twilight a sudden trembling and sweeping of the veil as the wandering Chorus stained the summer night with: *Shawking Murd' 'n Blooms-bree —' Pur!' London Fam'ly Mur-der —' purr'!* It broke into the bedrooms of wakeful children, and into the study of the scholar, and into the sick room and across quiet supper-tables and wherever it fell it left a wound. The Press, having given the wound, went on to probe and exacerbate it with the minutiæ of horror; ending with the disturbing advice to householders to see to their bolts and fastenings that night. It was the "splash" story of the day, and each paper had a narrative from neighbours and from those who were near the shop at the time of the crime's discovery. At late evening the story was this.

Artie Roake had been quickly found and interviewed. He frankly explained his absence by the regrettable fact that he had run away. Some information he was able to give, but none that in any way helped the search for the murderers.

As that day was the last day of his holidays, he had, he said, been taking things easy, and after the mid-day dinner had gone upstairs to lie down. He left his brother in the garden. His father and sister were in the shop-parlour, and his mother was in the shop. From two o'clock to five o'clock was a slack time with them. Most of the business came before twelve or from five o'clock to closing time; the afternoon brought mere straggles of custom. He remembered lying down on his bed, with coat and waistcoat off, and remembered nothing more until he suddenly awoke, and found himself, he said, all of a sweat. His head and hands were quite wet. He jumped up from the bed and stood uncertainly for a few moments, thinking he was going to be ill. And well he might have been ill, seeing what foul force was then sweeping through the air of that little house. Out of the sunlight something from the neglected corners of hell had come creeping upon it, to charge its rooms with poison and to fire it with the black lightning of sudden death. At the moment he awoke this creeping corruption must then have been in the house, and in its presence not the thickest and most wooden organism could have slept; for by some old sense of forest forefathers we are made aware of such presences. We can perceive evil in our neighbourhood through every channel of perception; can even *see* it through the skin. The potency of its vapours, then, must have worked upon the skin and the senses of this lad, as the potency of the unseen reptile works upon the nerves of birds, and he awoke because an alien and threatening presence had called him to awake. It must have been that, and not a cry or a blow, that awoke him, because he said that, during the few seconds when he stood half-awake and sweating, he heard his mother's voice in a conversational murmur. It was some seconds after *that* that the sweat froze on his face at the sound of his father's voice in three plodding syllables — "Oh . . . my . . . God! — and then of a noise such as a coalman makes when he drops an empty sack on the pavement. And then, almost simultaneously with the sack sound, he heard a little squeak that ended in a gurgle; and over-riding the gurgle on "Oh!" of surprise from his brother, and soft, choking tones of terror saying "No — no — no!" And then silence. And then he heard two sharp clicks, as of opening and shutting a door; and then a moment's pause; and then swift feet on the stairs. Had he had the courage to go down on his father's first cry, his courage, one may guess, would have been wasted. Hands would have been waiting for him, and he too would have ended on a gurgle. But if he had had the courage to wait before he fled until the figure or figures on

the stairs had come high enough to give him one glimpse, he might have had the clue to one of the men that would have helped the police to the others. But he didn't wait. He bolted. He offered the reporters no feeble excuse of going to raise the alarm or get help. He said that those sounds and the sort of feeling in the house so affected him with their hint of some unseen horror that he didn't think of anybody or anything; only of getting out. Peering from his door, he said, just as the sound of the feet came, he could see part of the staircase, and the sunlight through the glazed door between shop-passage and garden threw a shadow, or it might have been two shadows, half-way up the stairs. He could hear heavy panting. In the moment of his looking, the shadow began to swell and to move. He saw no more. In awkward phrases (so one of the reports stated) he tried to say that he felt in that shadow something more than assault ending in killing; he felt something horrible. From later information I understood this. It *was* horrible; so horrible that even this vegetable soul had responded to it. So, driven by he knew not what, and made, for the first time in his life, to hurry, he turned from the house of dusty sunshine and death to the open world of sky and shops and people. He bolted through the upper window and over the backyard, and did not stop or call for help until he was four streets away; at which point the cry of Murder led to a pursuit and capture of him.

He made his confession sadly but without shame. He *knew*, he said, that it was all over; that he could be of no use; that they were all dead. But when they pressed him *how* he knew, he relapsed from that moment of assertion into his customary cow-like thickness, and they could get no more from him than a mechanical, "I dunno. I just knew."

He was detained by the police for further questioning, and it appeared later that the questioning had been severe. But though there was at first an edge of official and public suspicion of him, he was able to satisfy the police that he knew nothing, and was allowed to go home to an uncle's.

No weapons were found, no fingerprints, no useful footprints. Nor had any suspicious characters been seen hanging about; at least, none markedly suspicious to the district; for in these misty byways queer characters of a sort were a regular feature, and its houses were accustomed at all hours of day and night to receiving furtive strangers. Taking it, at first sight, as gang work, the police, it was said, were pursuing enquiries in that direction, which meant that for the next few days all known members of North London and West End gangs were rounded up and harried out of their wits by

detentions, questionings and shadowings. Already, at that early hour, reports had come in of the detention of unpleasant characters at points on the roads from London — Highgate, Ealing, Tooting. Communications had been made with all lunatic asylums in and near London, but none could report any absentees. All those on the police list who might have been concerned in it — the shop and till specialists — were being visited and questioned, and many, knowing that they would be visited anyway, were voluntarily coming in to give satisfactory accounts of themselves.

One bright "special" had put his mind to the case and lighted the darkness of the police with a possible culprit. He learned that Horace Roake was 55, and from his study of "our medical correspondent" he knew that 55 was the male climacteric, the age when men of formerly sober life — particularly quiet men of Roake's type — go off the rails into all sorts of jungles of unnamable adventure. Was it not worth asking, he said, whether Mr. Roake might not have been doing badly in business, and being at that age had . . . ? But a rival paper, in a later issue, took this torch and extinguished it by bank evidence that Roake was not doing badly in business, and by private police-surgeon information that neither Roake nor any other of the victims could possibly have died by suicide.

There, that evening, it was left. Next morning there were further details, but nothing pointing towards an arrest. From some of these details it was clear that the affair, if planned at all, had been most cunningly planned and timed, and swiftly done; for the people were seen alive a minute and a half before the cry of Murder had been raised. The more likely conjecture, though, was that it was the impulsive act of a wandering gang.

A woman volunteered that she had visited the shop just after three — about ten minutes after — and had been served by Mrs. Roake. Nobody else was in shop. She left the shop and went a little way down the street to leave a message with a friend, and having left the message she re-passed the Roakes' shop, and saw a man whom she did not closely notice standing at the counter rattling some coins and calling "Shop!" Her own home was twelve doors from the shop. She had scarcely opened and closed her door, was, indeed, still on the mat, setting down her shopping basket, when she heard the cry of Murder. In the immediate instant of silence following that cry she heard a church clock strike the quarter past three, which meant that only three minutes had passed from the time of her being served by Mrs. Roake, and one minute from the time of her seeing the man.

Another statement came from a man whose house backed on to the Roakes'. He was on a night-shift at the docks, and went on at four o'clock. By daily use he knew exactly how to time himself to get there punctually from his home in Frostick Street; the time was fifty minutes; and he left home regularly at ten minutes past three. He was putting on his boots, he said, when, happening to glance through the window, he saw Mr. and Mrs. Roake in the shop-parlour doing — well, as he put it, clearly without any intent of flippancy, carrying-on and canoodling. They must then have remembered that they were open to curious eyes, for they immediately moved away from the window into the darker part of the room. At half-past four the evening paper came into the docks, and he saw that the family had been discovered dead five minutes after he had seen this little husband-and-wife moment.

One of the morning papers gave me a particular irritation. There was a solemn youth named Osbert Freyne (recently down from Cambridge) who used to come into my place at odd times, though I never made him welcome. He used to sit and blither —— talk one could not call it. I don't know why he continued to come, because I was always as rude to him as I can allow myself to be to anybody; but he did come and he did meet Trink, and he knew of Trink's acquaintance with the Roakes.

Well, one of the papers had an appendix to the Talleyrand "story" — an appendix by this solemn youth. Like most of his unbalanced kind, though he affected to despise modern writing, he wasn't above making money out of it when he could. The fellow had had a talk (or blither) with Trink, and had sold it to the paper as an interview with "an intimate friend of the unfortunate family." The result was that Trink had been visited and questioned by the police on the family's history and habits and their friends, and other journalists had followed the police, and altogether the poor fellow's miserable day had been made additionally miserable.

I knew what he must be feeling about it, for I myself began to be moved by it, though quite unwarrantably. I had scarcely any interest in those people, yet whenever I thought about the affair I suffered a distinct chill, as though I personally were in some way touched by it; an entirely unreasonable chill which I could not shake off because common sense could not reach it.

Among the first to be examined were the witnesses who were in the street at the time the alarm was given. This again brought nothing useful; indeed, the result was only confusion on confusion. Seventeen people who had been

near the spot were asked — Who was the man who rushed from the shop crying Murder? None of them knew him. They were then asked — What sort of man was he? Not one could make a clear answer. Eleven were so surprised that they didn't look at him. The other six — who, if they had looked at him, hadn't seen him but wouldn't admit it — gave six different descriptions. One saw a tall firmly-built man with red face. One saw a short man in a mackintosh. One saw a man in shirt and trousers only — obviously a confusion with the fleeing boy, Artie. One saw a fat man in a gray suit and a bowler hat. One saw a medium-sized man in cloth cap and the strapped corduroys of the navy. One saw a black man.

It seemed fairly certain, though, that the man who cried Murder could not have been the murderer, for two witnesses had seen members of the family alive within less than two minutes of the murders; and one man could not have been responsible for that wholesale slaughter in that space of time. The man who ran out must have been the man who had been seen by the woman witness standing there and shouting "Shop!" and as that was only one minute before the alarm, clearly *he* could not have been the murderer. He had not come forward, but then, there might be many innocent explanations of that. He might have been a man of nervous type who had received such a shock from what he had seen that he wished to avoid all association with the matter. Or he might have been a quiet, shy fellow who would hate to be mixed up in any sensational public affair. Having given the alarm, and having no useful information to offer beyond what the crowd saw for themselves, he might have considered that he had done his duty.

Generally, it was felt that it must have been the work of a gang — either a gang of thieves who were disturbed by the alarm before they could get at the cash, or, as suggested, a gang of drunken or drugged Negroes — and the gang must have entered from the back, or someone in the street would have noted them. It was the Negro suggestion that caught the public, chiefly because it seemed obvious and because it afforded a pious opportunity of shaking what they liked to think was an un-English crime on to those who were un-English. In talk around the streets the police were criticized for not concentrating on the Negro quarter. It was all very well to say that all the Negroes questioned had accounted for their movements. If the public were in the police's place, the public would know what to do, and so on.

The evening papers of that day brought more news, but none of it led anywhere. More suspicious characters on the outskirts of London had been

detained, and two men — one a soldier at Sheerness, the other a tramp at Gerard's Cross — had given themselves up for the murder, only to be thrown out an hour later. People in the neighborhood now began to remember strange and significant happenings centering on the Roakes, which they hadn't remembered the day before. Queer visitors, letters by every post, sudden outgoings, late home-comings — all the scores of commonplace family happenings which, when isolated and focussed and limelit by tragedy and publicity, assume an air of the sinister and portentous. If Mrs. Roake had gone out in a new hat the day before they would have seen *that* as a possible clue.

Day by day the story mounted, and all fact that was thin was fortified by flagrant conjecture and by "sidelights" and comparison with similar crimes.

The police were following a clue at Bristol. A broken and stained bicycle pump had been found behind the mangle in the scullery and was being examined by the Home Office experts. Three of the leading yard men had left London for a destination unknown. The writer of an anonymous letter, received at Bow Street the day after the murders, was asked to communicate with any police-station under a pledge of the fullest protection from all consequences. The Flying Squad had spent a whole day combing the road from Stoke Newington to Waltham Cross. Watch was being kept at Gravesend, Queenboro', Harwich, Grimsby, Hull and Newcastle for two men, believed to be Norwegians. The police were anxious to get in touch with these men. Blandly and hopefully they invited these two men to visit the Yard. But despite these invitations, despite official rewards and newspaper rewards running into many hundreds of pounds, no outside help was secured, no "splits" — those ever-present helps in baffling crimes — came forward to give their pals away.

Then, at the end of the week, the Sunday papers had a plum. All these minor diversions were cancelled and the men called off. The new story was that the District Inspector, with a detachment of officers in an armoured police car, had left for Nottingham; and the story was given out with such a note of assurance that the thing appeared to be settled. And it was. Press and public waited eagerly on the result of this expedition. And they waited. After two days, as the result of waiting, the Press was proudly silent on Nottingham. There was no report on the Nottingham expedition, but in its place a calm ignoring of it, as though it had never been. Nottingham was

still on the map of England but it was out of the news. The public heard nothing. Not a word. Somewhere between London and Nottingham the Great Talleyrand Murder Mystery faded away; crept into the valley of undiscovered crimes, and died as mysteriously as the Roake family had died.

Thereafter public and press interest declined. From being a "splash" story it came to an ordinary column; then, from the main page it passed to the secondary news page; then it fell to half a column, and at the end of three weeks it had no space at all. The mystery that had been the subject of talk in offices, shops, trains, restaurants and homes, was forgotten. The best brains had been at work upon it and had failed; and although I, in common with other amateurs, had my theories about it, not one of them bore steady examination.

Today I know the solution, but I did not arrive at it by my own thought or by thought based on the experts' labours. We were all looking for madmen, or, if we dismissed madmen, then for some possible motive; and in looking for motives we were looking for the ordinary human motives that we could appreciate, and that appear again and again in murder. None of us thought of inventing a *new* motive; and that was where the solution lay. It was not the experts, but Stephen Trink, the dabbler, who showed me where to look; who took my eyes off a gang, and showed me how all this death and disaster and stretching of police wits could have been the work of two hands belonging to one man. He even pointed to the man.

VI

It was about a month after the affair had died down that I found among the morning mail on my tea-tray a letter from Trink. It was dated from a hotel in the New Forest, and was an unusually long letter from one who scarcely ever addressed more than a post-card. And a queer letter. I read it in bed, and for some long time — an hour, I should think — I could not bring myself to get up and face the day. When at last I did, I found work impossible. All that day and night I was haunted by a spectre of forbidden knowledge, and I went perfunctorily about my occasions with a creeping of the flesh, as when one discovers a baby playing with a boiling kettle, or touches something furry in the dark. I knew then what it was that the boy Artie was trying to say.

But as the letter requires no editing or pointing, I give it *verbatim*.

"Dear T.B.,

"As we haven't met for some time I thought you might like a word from Stephen Trink. I've been down here for a week or so among the pines, seeking a little open-air massage for jangled nerves. You understand. It was a dreadful business, and I didn't want to see anybody, especially friends. I'm here doing nothing and seeing nothing — just breathing and drowsing.

"I suppose they've got no farther with it. Strange that the police, so astonishingly clever in making up really baffling and complicated cases, are so often beaten by a simple case. But you, as an artist, know how often a subtle piece of work which the public imagine to have been achieved by laborious and delicate process, was in fact done with perfect ease; and how often the simple piece of work has meant months of planning and revision. I don't know if you've thought about it at all, but it seems to me that they've been misled all along by the matter of time. They assumed that that little time, for such a business, must imply a gang. No sound reason why it should, though. As Samuel Nicks established an alibi by accomplishing the believed impossible — committing a crime at Gad's Hill, Kent, early one morning and being seen at York at seven o'clock the same evening, so this man deceived public opinion. The public of the seventeenth century held that it was not possible for a man to be in Kent in the morning and at York in the evening; all the horses in the kingdom couldn't carry him that distance in that time. Therefore, it hadn't been done, and Sam Nicks hadn't been in Kent that day. But it *was* done. And so here. Four murders by different means had been accomplished in a few seconds over a minute. Therefore, say the public (the experts, too), arguing from the general, it must have been the work of a gang. They were satisfied that no one man could do it, and if no one man could do it, then no one man *had* done it. But public opinion is always saying It Can't Be Done, and is always eating its words. You and I know that what any one man can *conceive*, some other man can *do*. I can imagine that this could be the work of one man, and I'm satisfied that it *was* the work of one man. It was done by the exception to the rule, and I'll show you how he could have done it, and how he got away. As to getting away, of course he got away by running away. If you say that a running man at such a moment would attract attention, well, we know that he did attract attention. He was clever enough to know that in successfully running away, it depends how you run. He covered his appearance and his running by drawing the whole street's attention to himself. He knew

enough about things to know that his cry would blind everybody. They might be looking, but they wouldn't be seeing — as we know they weren't. All their senses would gather to reinforce the sense of hearing. As soon as he was round a corner he could slip his hat in his pocket and put on a cap. Nothing makes a sharper edge on the memory, or more effectually changes a man's appearance, than the hat. Then he could fling his coat over his arm, and go back and join the crowd.

"The affair had to the public, as we know, the air of being the work of a brilliant and invincible gang of schemers, who weren't playing by any means their first stroke: or else of a gang of crafty madmen. It was this that increased its horror. But it was no planned affair, and no gang affair. It was the work of a man momentarily careless of results. Being careless, he made no mistakes. As often happens, he, the inexpert, achieved casually what trained minds arrive at step by step.

"Now as to how. Really very simple. The core of the mystery is this: he was a man of unbelievable swiftness of act and motion. That's all.

"People don't seem to realise that taking human life is a very simple matter. They seem to think that it involves thought, planning, struggle and mess. Nothing of the kind. It can be done as easily as the slaughter of a rabbit — more easily than the slaughter of a hen. A pressure with two fingers on a certain spot, or one sharp flick on a point at the back of the neck, and the business is done. It's part of the irony that plays about the creature, Man, that the neck, which supports his noblest part, should be his weakest part. You could do it without fuss in the club, on top of the 'bus, at Lord's, or at the theatre, or in your own home or your victim's. You remember that morning when you were showing me your collection of Eastern weapons? Among them you had a case of Burmese poison-darts. You took these out of their cylinder and showed them to me. I was leaning forward with my hands on your desk, and you were turning them about between finger and thumb. One minute movement of a minute muscle of your forefinger, and the point would have touched my hand, and Trink would have been out. Supposing you'd been not feeling very well — liverish — and my face or my voice had irritated you to the point of blind exasperation. A wonderful chance. Accidents often happen when things like that are being shown round. You may have seen the chance. If you did, only common good nature can have restrained you — supposing that you were irritated by me — as nothing but good nature restrains me from slapping a bald head in front

of me at the theatre. One second would have done it, where shooting and throat-cutting not only take time but often cause disorder and fuss, besides involving extravagant use of means. One stroke of a finger directed by a firm wrist achieves the result without any stress or display. Many people are killed by four or five stabs of a knife, or by a piece of lead shot from an instrument that has to be loaded, and in which a lever has to be released, causing a loud bang. Unnecessary, and possibly wasted. Because no result can be achieved unless that piece of lead goes to a certain spot. And there's nothing that that piece of lead can do that four fingers can't do. You could have six friends in your room looking over your curios, and with merely the movement of the arm that an orchestral conductor makes in directing a three-four bar, you could, holding one of those Burmese darts, touch the hands of those friends. In five minutes you would have changed your warm gossipy room into a sepulchre. And yet people still think of murder as implying revolvers, knives, arsenic; and murderers still take five minutes over throttling from the front with both hands, when two seconds with the side of one hand will do it from the back. It is because of this that the unintelligent conceive murder as terrific, demanding time and energy; and still think that all murder must leave obvious traces of murder. Not at all. For every one murder that is known to be a murder, I am certain that six other people, who meet Accidental Death or are Found Drowned lose their lives by murder.

"This man, as I say, was swifter than most of us. He strolled into the shop. Calling 'Shop!' he went to the parlour door. There he met Roake. One movement. Mrs. Roake would turn. Another movement. The girl was coming through the door leading to the passage. Two steps and another movement. The boy comes through the garden to the shop. A fourth movement. One movement with a knife on the back of Roake's head. One pressure with the thumb to Mrs. Roake. One movement with both hands to the girl. One sharp touch on the boy's neck. And the foul thing was done in a matter of seconds. A movement overhead. The other boy stirring. He waits for him to come down. The boy doesn't come. He hears the noise of his flight. Then he makes his own by running full tilt into the faces of a score of people and crying his crime.

"That's all.

"Looking over this, I'm afraid it reads as though I'm writing with levity. But I'm not. I'm just analysing the situation and the probable attitude of

the man. The whole thing is too frightful for me to treat it as seriously as I naturally feel about it; or, rather, in trying to treat it as a problem, I've forgotten that these poor people were my friends.

"Now as to why any man not a natural criminal or lunatic should have created this horror of destruction — this isn't going to be so easy. Here I'm on dangerous and delicate ground, and before I can present what looks to me like a reasonable explanation I must ask you to empty your mind of your reason and of all that knowledge of human nature on which people base their judgment of human motive and human behaviour. It should never be said that 'people don't do these things' or that such and such a thing is contrary to human nature; because people do anything and are always going contrary to our accepted notions of human nature. You must see it as clearly as one sees a new scientific idea — without reference to past knowledge or belief. It means trespassing into the forbidden, though I think you've peeped into more secret corners of the mind than the ordinary man. Or not peeped, perhaps. I think you've always known without peeping.

"It's difficult to put the presentation of it into assured and assuring phrasing. But I'll try.

"What I offer is this. This man had a motive for this wanton slaughter. But not a motive that would pass with common understanding. Neither hate nor lust nor the morbid vanity that sometimes leads stupid people to the committal of enormous crimes. Nothing of that sort. And he wasn't a madman without responsibility for his actions. He knew fully what he was doing and he did it deliberately. He committed more than a crime; he committed a sin. And meant to. Most men think that sin is the ultimate depth to which man can sink from his gods; but this man didn't sink. He rose, by sin, out of something fouler than sin. That something is the spirit of unexpressed, potential evil; something that corrodes not only the soul of the man in whom it dwells, but the souls of men near him and the beautiful world about him. This evil doesn't always — indeed, seldom does — live in what we call wicked people. Almost always in the good. In comparison with such people the wicked are healthy. For these people, the germ-carriers, are more dangerous to the soul of man than a million criminals or a thousand sinners. They can penetrate everywhere. We have no armour against their miasma. They do no evil, but they're little hives of evil. Just as some people can spread an infection without themselves taking the disease, so these good people can, without sinning, spread among the innocent the infection of sin.

They lead stainless lives. Their talk is pure. Yet wherever they go they leave a grey trail that pollutes all that is noble and honest. They diffuse evil as some lonely places — themselves beautiful — diffuse evil. You must have met people of this sort — good people — and have been faintly conscious, after an hour of their company, of some emanation that makes you want to open spiritual windows. Happy for them, poor creatures, if they can discover and prove themselves before death for what they are. Some do. For those who don't, who only discover the foulness of their souls after death, God knows what awaits them.

"There's something in these people. Some awful essence of the world's beginnings. Some possession that can only be cast out in one way — a dreadful way. Where it began one cannot say. Perhaps strange sins, projected in the cold hearts of creatures centuries-dead, projected but never given substance, take on a ghost-essence and wander through the hearts of men as cells of evil. And wander from heart to heart, poisoning as they go, until at last they come to life in a positive sin, and, having lived, can die. Nobody knows. But that's my explanation of these people — they're possessed. Possessed by some radio-active essence of evil, and before they can be saved they must sin. Just as poison is necessary to some physical natures and, denied it, they die, so sin may be necessary to these spiritual natures. They must express and release that clotted evil, and they can no more be cleansed of it before it's expressed than a man can be cleansed of a fever before it's reached its climacteric. Once expressed, it can be met and punished and pardoned; but abstract evil can't be met. Even God can't conquer Satan. There's nothing to conquer. Satan lives in these million wandering fragments of potential evil, and until that evil is crystallised in an act, all the powers of good are powerless.

"Let's suppose that this man was one of these, consciously possessed of this intangible essence of evil, conscious of it as a blight upon him and upon those about him; tortured by it like a man with a snake in his bosom, and for many years fighting its desire for expression and release until the fight became unbearable. There's only one way of escape for him — to sin and to sin deeply. Always he's haunted by the temptation to sin. His whole life's been clouded by visions and lures of unnamable sins, and by agonising combats to escape them. Always he fights this temptation, and so, continuing to shelter the evil, he gives it time to grow and to make his own emanations stronger. When his only real hope of conquering it lies in giving it life.

"And then at last he yields. There comes, one day, the eruptive, whirlwind moment of temptation, stronger than any he has known. All his powers of resistance go down in an avalanche. With a sigh of relief he yields. And suddenly, with the disappearance of resistance, and with the resolve to sin, he would find, I think, the serenity of resignation filling his whole being, and setting his pulse in tune with erring humanity. He would walk the streets with a lighter step than he has known since childhood. All his temptations would have been towards the foulest sin he could conceive, the lowest depth; and at last, driven by the importunate fiend, it's this sin that he commits. It may be that he was led farther than he meant to go. He may have intended to murder only one, but in committing the one murder, his fiend broke out in full power, and led him deeper and deeper into maniac slaughter. That's how it looks. But the thing was done, the sin committed, and in the Satanic moment he frees himself forever from his fiend, not by binding it, but by releasing it. Like a long-embalmed body exposed to the air, it has one minute of life, and the next it crumbles into dust, and he is free.

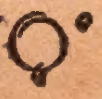
"That's my theory. This man, without sin, would have died here and hereafter, for his soul didn't belong to him at all. Indeed, he was a man without a soul. Now he's a man with a stained soul which can be purified. He has seen himself as he is, on this earth, in time to prepare himself for his next stage. By that sin he can now, as a fulfilled and erring soul, work out his penance and his redemption.

"I guess I've said enough. You may dismiss this as a far-fetched and ludicrous fancy. But it isn't a fancy; it's a statement. You may say that no man could, under the most overwhelming temptation, do this appalling act of murdering, not an enemy, but a friend; or, having done it, could live under its burden. I can't argue with you as to what man can and can't do. I only see what is done. It's useless to tell me that this couldn't have happened. I can only say that it did.

"Whatever you may know as to the reactions of humanity to this or that situation, I know that, after years of torment, I'm now, for the first time, at peace.

"Yours,

"S.T."



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